Interview with Ana Cristina Mirassou, Director of Biotechnology , Grupo Ifaco

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The company Cryopharma was founded in 1954 with 10 employees. Today, you have fantastic facilities here in the state of Jalisco, and have grown the company to an entire group – Grupo IFACO – with more than 400 employees…Could you tell us about the major achievements and milestones of Grupo IFACO over the last few years?

One of our main milestones was to introduce our biotechnology project in 2002. However, our first biotech product only entered the market in 2009 when we were granted the registration. As you know, there has been some turmoil around biotech regulation in Mexico, and for a long time, the authorities were uncertain as to which requirements to ask for in a new biotech product. Companies who were able to register their products before this turmoil were granted the registration in about six months, whereas we had to wait two or three years.

Another major milestone was to receive the National Technology Award for our biotechnology research and development lab in 2006. Indeed, we had the newest technology for reactors and purification processes, among others. We also had a progressive model for innovation management which involved market research and Intellectual Property management. We are one of the few Mexican companies willing to invest in Research and Development.

Another milestone for the group was a joint project with the United Nations that we completed about two years ago. The idea was to eliminate CFCs from metered-dose inhalers, and in a joint effort we bought new machinery, and completely substituted our production line with environmentally friendly technology.

Investing in Research and Development and betting on high technology is not all that common in Mexico. What made you decide to take that path?

The path was established by my grand-father because he didn't want to depend on anyone to get things done well, and on time. In the past, we used to receive fines for not delivering on time because our suppliers were delayed, so my grandfather started the company MANAFAR, that would provide us with the relevant glass containers, as well as the company Offset-Press de Mexico in order to provide us with packaging services – all part of Grupo IFACO. In the same way, we decided not to buy some of our Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs), but to make them – so we built an organic synthesis plant. We developed the process in-house, and today we not only use our APIs for our own products, but we also sell them to large international pharmaceutical companies.

On the biotechnology side, it started with my grandfather who gathered a lot of people in the sector together to share their knowledge with us, and today, although we are not going to find the cure for cancer, we are going to make the processes along the way much more economical.

Grupo IFACO is indeed a self-sufficient group. As you explained, your grandfather started MANAFAR and Offset-Press, but Pizzard and Salus for example were acquisitions. Are you looking at any other niche acquisitions to expand your activities?

We are currently focusing on expanding what we already have. A great example of this is that we are planning to expand our biotechnology facilities as production on this segment will soon increase drastically.

Your first biotechnology product was registered in 2009. Could you develop on your current biotech portfolio?

In our biotechnology area, we currently sell Erythropoietin (EPO), which is produced from mammalian cells. In the near future, we hope to have a stronger presence in oncology with the production of monoclonal antibodies and other complex proteins.

Our biotechnology center will be the main growth driver for the group, and we hope to see our sales revenues jump by 50% with these new registrations, if we place the products accordingly.

Since 2009 have you seen any improvement in the registration process of biotechnology products in Mexico?

It took a long time, during which it was very hard to know what to expect from the authorities, but we now have guidelines that definitively shape the industry, and we are expecting another set of guidelines to be launched very soon in order to make the registration process more transparent and effective.

Mikel Arriola of COFEPRIS has done a very good job, even though he has only been in the role for about 18 months. He also played a key role in promoting generics by encouraging generic drug registrations as soon as innovative products lost their patents.

Remaining on the topic of government, the State of Jalisco is very involved in life sciences and actively promotes biotechnology. Why do you think this is, and what benefit does that represent for Grupo IFACO?

The governor of Jalisco declared biotechnology as one of the key strategic industries for the state during his mandate. He sees biotechnology as the future, not only on the medicinal side, but also for agriculture, and he has taken an active role in boosting the whole biotechnology sector. As an example, Grupo IFACO was granted around 2.5 million USD for Research and Development from a state and federal fund to help upgrade our equipment and conduct clinical trials.

With such state of the art production facilities, are you looking into either exporting or out-licensing some of your products?

We are currently in discussion with some European companies to export our biotechnology products. What makes us a particularly valuable partner for these companies is that we own the whole production value chain, which makes it easier for them to register the products in their home countries.

With such a growth potential, having the right people to sustain this growth is certainly a crucial issue. How would you describe the talent pool in the State of Jalisco?

A few years ago it was very hard to find the right people, but today things have changed. Universities in Jalisco have been promoting careers in life sciences, so the talent pool has broadened. We have direct programs with CIATEJ, one of the biggest research centers in Guadalajara, so we don’t necessarily integrate the talent in-house, but we work in close connection with the educational institutions. It is good for the universities and research centers because they can publish and develop their intellectual property, and it’s good for us because it accelerates the whole process of development. We have also trained people that have now been working with us for ten years, and today these same people are training our new recruits.

Despite all of this, it’s still not enough; university students are lacking practical experience in the industry, and in the same way companies are quite reluctant to invest time in training students who might leave the company after a couple of months. The trick is to pick the people that are willing to work for you for a minimum of five years, which is not easy.

You are one of the rare female managers in this industry. Do you find it a challenge?

It can be tough, especially since I’m also very young. But Mexico is changing, and our culture is changing too. We have a female candidate for the presidential elections, and in some ways she’s helping us to get pushed into the spotlight.

If we come back in five years, where can we expect to find Grupo IFACO?

We will have a brand new, top-notch biotechnology facility; about twenty more registered products; our revenues will have increased dramatically and hopefully we will have our products present in both Europe and Central America.

Do you have a final message for our readers?

I would like to let the world know that Mexico is emerging as an important hub for the production of biotechnology products. Once we have our legislation in order, we will be extremely competitive, not only inside Mexico, but internationally.

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