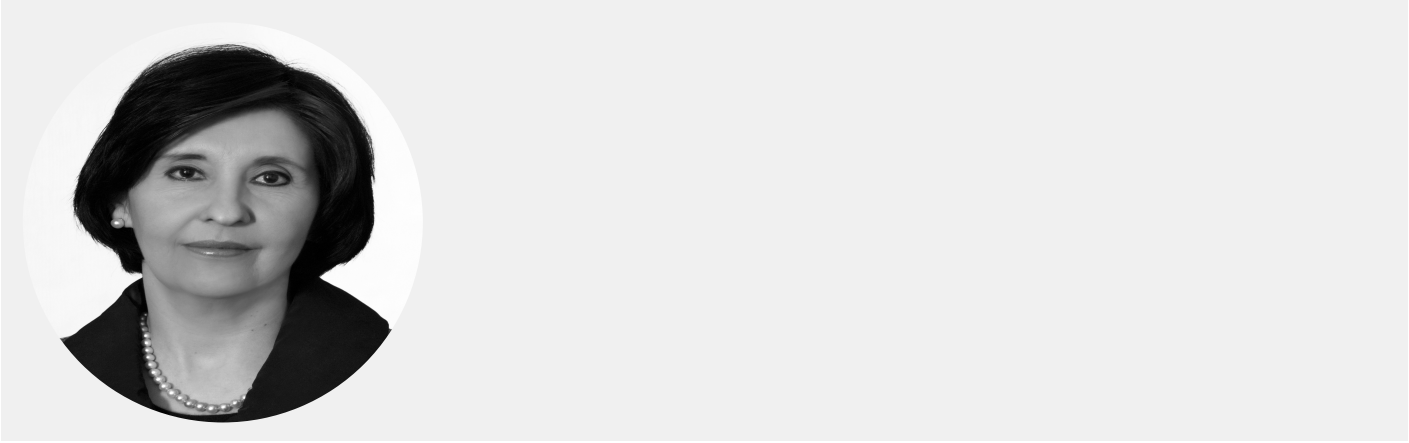
Instituto Nacional de Neurología y Neurocirugía Manuel Velasco Suárez – Dr. Teresa Corona Vazquez, General Director – Mexico



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The first woman appointed as general director of one of the leading neurosciences institutions in Latin America discusses the Institute's priorities in terms of R&D for brain diseases, training of high-specialty medical professionals and the increasing trend towards "feminization of medicine" in Mexico.

You were appointed general director of the Institute back in 2012. Could you please give our readers a brief overview of the activities of the Institute?

The INNN (National Institute for Neurology and Neurosurgery) was created back in 1964 with the purpose of fostering scientific research, training human resources and providing high-quality healthcare. The INNN is considered one of the leading centers for the study of neurological sciences in Latin America and one of the few institutions around the world devoted exclusively to the research, education, diagnosis and treatment of brain diseases, from its molecular basis to their social implications. It was initially conceived as an institution where the three main divisions of the clinical neurosciences – neurology, neurosurgery and psychiatry – were to be considered with equal importance, and this scheme has proved a right choice for the comprehensive study of brain diseases.

The Institute focuses on 21 R&D lines mainly relied with diseases, which nowadays represent the most important burden of diseases to Mexico, such as diabetes and overweight. What kind of pathologies do you mainly focus on and what is your approach to patients?

At the INNN we have focused our attention on the evolving epidemiological profile of the Mexican population, with a particular eye at how neurodegenerative diseases such as Parkinson, dementia and brain tumors evolve with the modern increase of life expectancy and cerebrovascular diseases. A disease that plays a particular important role in Mexico is multiple sclerosis, as it is the main cause of chronic disability for young people in the country. The good news is that a number of biotech drugs have entered the country to help us tackle this condition. On the other hand, being still a developing country, we do not have to forget infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and neurocysticercosis.

Our institution encompasses a diverse spectrum of specialties and neuroscience branches, such as neurology, neurosurgery, neuropsychiatry, neurogenetics, neuro-ophtalmology, neurophysiology and neurochemistry, among others. All our patients receive multidisciplinary points of view and treatments, as we think it is more efficient to look at a problem from several angles. We have experts of each area that will thoroughly analyze each patient’s case with a different perspective.

We also have a number of programs in place to support not only patients, but also their families and caretakers. Just to mention a few, our nurses are qualified to provide patients with information on general questions such as weight, height and blood pressure. This methodology has proved to save time for doctors so they can attend more patients. We also have a transplant program in which we constantly provide feedback to patients and their families about the positive impact transplants can have on the life of other human beings. Last but not least we offer thanatology courses to family members to help them overcome the loss of their loved ones.

How do you train human resources in the field of neurosciences?

To help us best develop our human resources besides we have a number of agreements with Mexican public and private universities, such as Mexico’s most important academic institution the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), which gives us the degrees for our specialties, masters and PhDs, the UAM, La Salle and Tec de Monterrey. Besides these we also have agreements with several international universities and institutions in the US (UCLA and San Diego University) and in France (the Salpêtrière Hospital), so most of our residents spend at least a term abroad. I am proud to say that a couple of years ago the Slim Foundation recognized the INNN

amongst one of the most important medical institutions in Latin America in terms of medical know-how and creation of high specialty human resources. An interesting data is that the average age of our researchers is 40 years, which is a crucial age as they have the expertise of mature researchers but the vitality of young people!

What is the main challenge the Institute faces today and how are you overcoming it?

As it is the case with most of the national healthcare institutions in Mexico, funding is an issue and since we handle a high volume of patients most of our budget is funneled to medical care instead of research or human resources development. We try to do our best with the budget we have and always act as a severe judge with ourselves with the help of constant surveys we apply to all of our patients. Most of the time patients grade the Institute as an excellent service provider, but, of course, not everything is perfect and we try to do our best to improve the weak spots.

Fortunately, a number of institutions are helping the Institute's scientific and medical research with grants and funding, as it is the case of CONACyT (the National Council for Science and Technology), the Instituto Carlos Slim de la Salud and some US-based universities. One of our jobs is also to help decision makers underpin the fact that we need more monetary resources to continue our R&D endeavors through all the projects and research protocols that we present them. The government should realize that all our efforts translate into tangible results: we develop treatments for dementia, Parkinson, epilepsy, headache and brain tumors, among others. Our knowledge seeks to transcend the walls of our laboratories and finally reach medical care facilities all around Mexico.

Mexico seems to be a country where men still have the lead. What is your experience as the first female general director of this institute and what is your piece of advice to women interested in pursuing a career in the healthcare sector?

Being appointed general director has been one of the most enriching experiences in my life and I think it is really important that such relevant spaces and decision-making roles are opened to women in our society. When you have a professional approach in the early stages of your life, things become much easier because there is a time in life when you will have to face competition processes for a leadership position or a better income, among many other things. When that moment comes – and if you prepare yourself from a young age – you will have a complete and competitive profile. You need to fight your way through with absolute transparency and honesty. There are a lot of obstacles women have to overcome to show they are as capable as men are. I would recommend never losing coherence and consistency with who you are and your main priorities.

Another advice I always give to our residents is not to letting personal life be an anchor to their professional life. Many women experience motherhood and give up on their career, as getting back to being active as a professional is very demanding. Being a mother should not interfere and contradict your professional aspirations. For this reason here at INNN, we have implemented hiring programs in which we give women an advantage of two years over men because they might have opted for motherhood and/or taking care of their new-borns. Mindsets are difficult to change but it is nothing that can't be accomplished.

Statistics show that in the last few years there is a trend towards a so-called "feminization of medicine" in Mexico, with more female students graduating from medicine at a 60:40 ratio and even 70:30 in certain universities. For instance we currently have four female resident neurosurgeons in our institution for a specialty, which takes about seven years to complete and historically has been mainly practiced by men. We just need a few examples like these to show we can get to important positions in the medical community. We only need to keep pushing!

What are the key priorities of the Institute for the coming five years?

We want to have a real impact on healthcare in Mexico, while becoming internationally recognized for our achievements in neurosciences. A lot of our programs are interested in creating a strong physician-patient relationship because we want our beneficiaries to be aware that we are doing everything we can to help them and provide them with a better lifestyle and quality of life. We want the new generation of healthcare professionals to pay a lot of attention on creating empathy with patients. We also think transparency is of utmost importance and make sure the Institute funding is managed in the most transparent way.

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