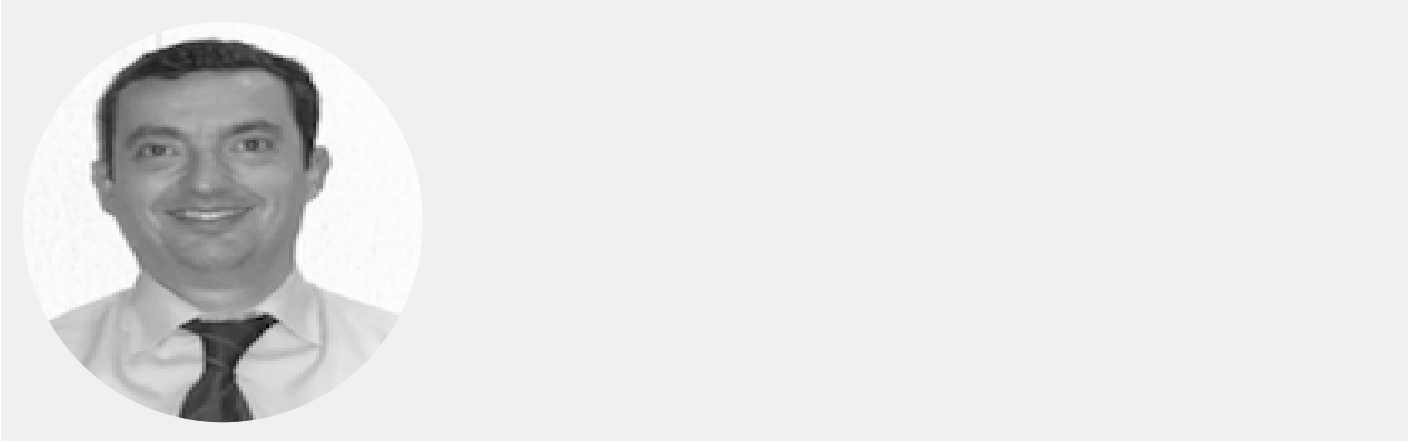
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Vaccination is one of the most important achievements of mankind. The general manager of Sanofi Pasteur Mexico shares the company's vision behind the decision to choose Mexico as one of the company's selected production sites worldwide, why the country provided the best conditions to develop the soon-to-be-launched dengue vaccine and how the company strives to continue being a partner in public health.

Back in 2009 Mexico was chosen by Sanofi Pasteur to install one of its global production plants for vaccines. Why Mexico?

To explain the rationale behind Sanofi Pasteur's decision to choose Mexico as a global manufacturing site, it is very important to highlight that the production of vaccines is a highly specialized and difficult process. This is the reason why only a limited number of companies worldwide operate in this segment. Five years ago Sanofi Pasteur only had vaccine production in France, US and Canada. Due to increasing global demand we decided to establish additional manufacturing sites in Argentina for hepatitis B through the acquisition of a local small producer in Pilar, a city in the province of Buenos Aires, and in Mexico and in China for flu antigens. As a result, today we have production in six countries.

The main reasons that lead the company to pick Mexico over other countries – in the region as well as worldwide – is the strong commitment of the Mexican government to public health, and specifically to vaccination. Many will be surprised to hear this, but Mexico has one of the most complete public immunization programs in the world after the US. This means a Mexican is vaccinated with the largest offer of vaccines available and the costs are fully covered by the government. This is something unbelievable, even in Europe where governments are very welfare-oriented. The Mexican government has had this pioneer vision for a long time. The continuity in public health policy, independently from the party in power, and the importance given to vaccination and prevention by the Ministry of Health as well as by the regulatory authority COFEPRIS is carved in Mexicans' DNA. That's why Sanofi Pasteur decided to – and continues to – bet on Mexico.

And is the bet paying off?

The bet is definitely paying off. In 2012 – my first year as a general manager here in Mexico – we produced 13 million vaccine doses, in 2013 it was 26 million and last year 30 million. The premises gave us all the elements to continue investing in the country. Today we plan to double the current capacity by building an additional manufacturing plant close to the existing one, with two important goals in mind. First, to produce the capacity requested by the Ministry of Health for the Mexican population entitled to free vaccination: infants from 6 months to 5 years, elder people over 50 and population at risk. Second, Mexico is intended to be a regional platform to deliver vaccines to the rest of the region and – why not? – to other countries of the Southern hemisphere.

Along with production facilities, Sanofi Pasteur also decided to concentrate in Mexico the largest R&D platform for vaccines in Latin America to develop products intended to satisfy local needs, as it is the case of dengue. And the positive outcome of our bet was also confirmed by all the changes that are being implemented at regulatory level. This makes Mexico very interesting to Sanofi Pasteur as well as to other companies interested in developing drugs here.

COFEPRIS has been recently recognized as a Functional Regulatory Agency for vaccines by the World Health Organization (WHO) for the 2014-17 period. What does this recognition mean for the country and for your operations?

The recognition is very important for Mexico, as only a limited number of agencies in the region count with it, actually only Brazil and Cuba. This reflects the high level of competence and expertise COFEPRIS has been able to reach over the past few years. This recognition is also key for Sanofi Pasteur, as it allows us not only to produce here, but also to export our products worldwide,

because WHO standards are also applied to R&D and clinical studies conducted in the country. It is key for us to work with a regulatory agency with such high standards and, again, this recognition confirms our bet on Mexico.

Arriola told us that thanks to this recognition in 2015 Mexico is going to receive an investment of USD 45 million from Sanofi Pasteur. In what will this money be invested?

Actually, it's a bit more than USD 45 million! The money will be invested in increasing our production of flu vaccines. Today, we have production capacity for 30 million doses, but we plan to increase it by scaling up manufacturing and introducing 24/7 shifts. The Mexican healthcare system needs more doses and we also plan to move from a three-strains to a four-strains vaccine, which has already been launched in the US two years ago and is already available in the Mexican private market.

Sanofi Pasteur announced that by end of 2015 Mexico will likely be the first market to launch the dengue vaccine. Again, why Mexico? What competitive advantages did the country offer over other sites in the world?

The dengue vaccine is a revolution in terms of public health, as the incidence of dengue has grown dramatically in recent decades. According to the WHO, about half of the world's population is at risk, especially in tropical and sub-tropical climates. Hence, it's a top priority for a large number of countries around the world. Mexico competed with other countries in the region that also have a high incidence of the disease, such as Brazil, Colombia and Venezuela. Eventually, Sanofi Pasteur selected Mexico for Latin America and the Philippines for Asia. The Mexican government gave us the support to conduct all clinical studies in Mexico and this, combined with the vision the company has for the country, made us decide to develop the vaccine here. Mexico never had Phase I studies for vaccines, while for the dengue vaccine we conducted Phase I, II and III locally.

Sanofi Pasteur plays a very unique role here in Mexico: we are not only a provider of vaccines, but a real public health partner to the government. As the government has showed us support, we are highly committed to the country and to ensure our vaccines are administered in the correct way to have a real impact. As one of Sanofi Pasteur's founders, Charles Mérieux, pointed out to have an impact on public health it's not only about producing the vaccines, we also need to make sure they get to the right people and are administered in the correct way.

What was the vision behind the development of the dengue vaccine?

Dengue is a disease, which is common in developing countries, but not in mature markets. I would dare to say it's the first time a company invests in a vaccine for developing countries. We have to build a completely new business model, different from the past, where you take the profitability from high-income countries to invest in R&D and make the products more affordable in low-income countries. This is the vision Sanofi Pasteur has for the future. We want to increase availability of vaccines in low- and mid-income countries, not only in high-income ones. To make this happen we must sign agreements with key R&D centers, which tackle conditions relevant to the region such as Chagas disease or tuberculosis.

What are your key priorities as a general manager for Sanofi Pasteur in Mexico as well as in the region for the coming years?

I have three priorities: first, to transform Sanofi Pasteur Mexico in a production platform for vaccines for Latin America, second to leverage our powerful R&D platform to bring new solutions for public health and third, as a general manager, to continue delivering results to the top management so they continue supporting Mexico and our decisions.

Sanofi Pasteur seems to be a great place to work. Why do you think this is the case?

To answer the question I will share with you a short anecdote. Some months ago, we were working on a short video about the mission and vision of the company. We decided to stop talking and show images, so went to the mountains of the state of Jalisco, where several indigenous populations live. There we saw the fantastic work the Mexican Ministry of Health does to deliver vaccines across the country, even to the most remote regions. When we showed the images to our colleagues, they saw the mission and the vision of the company in five minutes. And people feel proud of being part of a company with these values.

Vaccination is one of the most important achievements of mankind. We want to continue working with the government and having such a huge impact on the health of the country. When you are able to communicate to all the people working at Sanofi Pasteur our legacy, our experience and vision in public health, why we are here and why the government considers us a partner, people understand we are a unique company that helps prevent diseases, not cure them.

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