Interview: Oscar Parra – General Manager, Lundbeck Mexico

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Lundbeck Mexico GM Oscar Parra discusses raising awareness of depression in Mexico, Lundbeck's innovative treatments for depression and Alzheimer's, and managing to navigate the country's regulatory process to ultimately benefit the patient.

Lifestyle related illnesses are a major problem in Mexico, with 13 million people suffering from diabetes and 71 percent of the population obese or overweight. Less well-known but equally debilitating is depression; how is Lundbeck working to increase awareness about the importance of treating this illness?

Diabetes is a major problem in Mexico. We need to be able to address this matter very effectively and efficiently. Mexico has a very young population, but due to the obesity problem, we are not reaching our maximum potential in productivity. Another factor hindering our productivity as a country is depression. We know this is true for all Central Nervous System (CNS) diseases, but we are focusing on depression because it is the most common one. A depressed patient is generally incapable of going to work and going through basic daily activities. When this patient actually goes to work, he is unable to perform in the expected way. We use productivity as our key element to make government stakeholders realize the impact that depression is having in Mexico, because it has a visual impact on the economy. Additionally it is important to work on the stigma that surrounds mental disorders such as depression, so people can feel free to look for help.

While it is true that obesity and diabetes are a tremendous problem for Mexican society, we cannot understate the importance of depression. Our young people have incredible potential, but if we do not address this problem, we are losing potential growth. We have an incredible advantage compared to aging countries with such a large young population, but we have to take care of them.

Are perspectives on depression changing in Mexico? Is the government rolling out any initiatives to create awareness?

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There has been an evolution of the acceptance of depression as a disease in Mexico but at a slow pace. Due to the stigma that surrounds depression, it is sometimes difficult for many patients to accept that they are sick. Our society is still not completely ready to accept that, even though you cannot physically see them, mental diseases are real. Because most patients go to primary care physicians to seek help, they can be diagnosed with fatigue or lack of vitamins. Thankfully, when they visit a psychiatrist, they can be diagnosed and treated correctly. That is why continuous increasing the awareness of mental disease for primary care physicians is paramount. At Lundbeck we are trying to create awareness with primary care physicians on how to properly diagnose patients with depression. In this regard, Lundbeck offers medical education activities to primary care doctors. We have online courses with different modules to learn how to diagnose and treat depression and other CNS diseases.

Lundbeck has also similar programs for Alzheimer’s disease. Alzheimer’s disease is a very debilitating and costly disease since it prevents the patient from doing the most basic of activities, from bathing to even moving. In Mexico, it is very common for a family member of the patient to take care of these patients, so we develop literature to guide them on how to properly assist their loved ones. Because it is very hard for caregivers to see their mother or father not able to recognize them, shower, or even remember their own name, we give them as much information as possible on how to take care of them and better handle this dramatic situation.

What is being done to prevent or detect diseases such as Alzheimer’s at an early stage?

We are far from having a preventative system in place in Mexico. I think that in order to see the importance of preventing and treating diseases such as Alzheimer’s disease and depression, we have to grasp the economic impact that they have on the patients, their families and our country

What is the size of the Mexican antidepressant market and what are its dynamics?

The Mexican market is worth around USD 150 million and it is growing quickly compared to other markets. It is also a very dynamic market and includes brand name players as well as generics. Despite the few launches that are expected in the near future, I am expecting it to continue the strong growth that it has shown so far. Last year the Mexican antidepressant market grew by nine percent!

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Lundbeck's flagship antidepressant Brintellix has been launched in various countries and is performing well. How has the drug been received in Mexico?

It has been doing very well in Mexico and has great market potential. There have been significant changes in the market since the last time we launched a product for depression. This product is showing promising results in helping the mood and cognitive aspects of depressions.

In addition, we have a project that is in the late phase of development for treating Alzheimer's disease, which will be one of the few products available for treating this illness. We also have Brexpiprazole, which is awaiting approval. This product has the indication to treat schizophrenia, but also for treatment resistant depressions in combination with an antidepressant.

To what extent is Lundbeck's global momentum following its restructuring being replicated in the Mexican subsidiary?

We are experiencing the same great results. Our products are performing well and we are also working on improving our processes to increase efficiency. At the end of the day, we all work together for the results of Lundbeck.

Mexico already is in the top ten of Lundbeck's subsidiaries in the world outside of the US.

In 2014, we were in a transitional period after losing some patents, which had put pressure on the top line. Today, we have balanced out those loses and we are heading in a different direction. We are also launching new products, which puts us on a very positive path.

How would you describe the openness of the *Federal Commission for the Protection against Sanitary Risk* (Cofepris) to registering new drugs?

In my experience, Cofepris has shown visible improvements in the past five years. There is always room for improvement, but I have seen an openness towards registering new products, and doing so in a timely manner.

As an innovation-driven company, our top priority is to launch new products. We launched one in 2015, we will launch one in 2017, and another in 2018. We are expecting great success from these innovative products. In addition, we are trying to maintain a very productive and efficient organization.

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What's your take on the relationship between investing in clinical research in Mexico and getting public institutions to register these products faster?

In the past, it was difficult to see the benefits in conducting clinical research in Mexico due to the time that it would take to get these protocols approved by the public sector – in comparison to international standards. Thankfully, that has changed due to the new policies that have been implemented by IMSS and Cofepris to ramp up the approval process of clinical protocols.

I believe there is a need to find new places to do research in the world. We have many very capable specialists of running good clinical trials; we have the space to build facilities, and so much more. I am sure that Lundbeck would love to take part in this initiative, which would ensure that our products reach the market faster, helping the economy of Mexico, and -most importantly- improving the lives of our patients.

A year and a half ago, Lundbeck launched an app to help connect with patients. What have been the results of your efforts in this regard?

Lundbeck is in the business of helping patients that suffers from CNS disorders. Everything that we do has the ultimate goal of improving people's lives. We have taken different approaches to help patients and their family members to deal with debilitating diseases, such as CNS diseases. Although we do not engage personally with the patients, we offer several educational tools and tips to convey our message and share our expertise.

After working in Mexico for five years, what kind of skills have you developed?

I think from all my previous experiences, including Mexico, the most important trait that I have learned is to be agile. Knowing how to adapt is paramount. This industry is dynamic, and you have to be able to change with it. You always need to find the way!

Finally, what makes Lundbeck such a great place to work?

This company looks at people like people. It is a people oriented company that is respectful and fair. We try to make the company approachable; this way we can solve problems as efficiently as

possible without going through lengthy processes. I have been working for Lundbeck for 15 years and I will probably stay here for many more.

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