Interview: Raul Vivar – General Manager, Eisai Mexico



Although many pharma companies have now put patient-centricity at the core of their marketing strategy, this hhc philosophy stands out as Eisai's driver on a daily basis

15.09.2016

Tags: Pharma, Pharmaceuticals, Innovation, Mexico, Japan, Oncology, Patient-centricity

Raul Vivar, recently appointed GM of Eisai Mexico, describes the main achievements of the Japanese company in Mexico, the challenges that innovative companies face entering the Mexican market, and the development path he will follow in order to foster growth.

You took over the helm of the Mexican affiliate of Eisai in January 2016, a strategic market for the group, alongside Russia, Brazil, Canada, and Australia. What were your first impressions on joining the company?

My first impressions were extremely positive! In Latin America, people usually don't hold a deep knowledge of Japanese companies' activities and their products. I was for example particularly impressed to find out that many life-changing products were actually developed by Eisai, while they are now distributed by some global partners in Mexico.

Moreover, I was particularly impressed by the so-called *hhc* (human health care) philosophy of the group, which truly is the starting point of this global pharmaceutical company. Based on the acknowledgment that patients as well as their families are the key players in healthcare, we believe it is important for each employee to get close to patients and see their reality through their eyes to pick up on thoughts and feelings that might not necessarily always be expressed in words. Accordingly, the Eisai Group encourages all of its employees around the world to spend 1 percent of their working hours in socializing, namely spending time together with patients.

Although many pharma companies have now put patient-centricity at the core of their marketing strategy, this *hhc* philosophy stands out as Eisai's driver on a daily basis, and our headquarters are extremely attentive that this approach is fully shared and implemented across all our international affiliates.

When you took over in January 2016, Eisai Mexico had already launched the anticancer agents Halaven® and Gliadel® in April 2015. How was the affiliate doing when you joined?

[Featured_in]

Eisai Mexico indeed started its commercial operations in April 2015, following several years of strategic building to set up the affiliate's basis and receive marketing authorization for Halaven® and Gliadel®. Besides getting marketing authorizations, 2015 clearly was a very busy year for Eisai in Mexico: we were entering the market, which implied we had first to raise awareness around our products among the Mexican oncology community. Nevertheless, it is never easy to set up an affiliate and launch new products at the same time. I am particularly proud of the outstanding achievements our company managed to reach over such a short period of time.

In a way, 2016 stands as our first full-scale year of operations in the Mexican market. By leveraging the credibility and awareness that we have already built among the Mexican ecosystem, 2016 will mark further progress against our strategy, with a clear aim to deliver solid sales growth we expect.

Considering the strategic importance of the Mexican market for Eisai, what fundamental mission has been assigned to you by the group's headquarters?

As well as growing our sales, my mission mainly revolves around ensuring our treatments can be accessible through the Mexican public sector as soon as possible. For all innovative companies implanted in Mexico, (public) market access remains the name of the game. So far, our three approved treatments Halaven®, Gliadel ® and Lenvima® are only accessible through the private, retail segment. We are now concentrating our efforts on bringing these treatments to the Mexican patients in the public healthcare system.

Each company develops different market access strategies, depending of its size and the nature of its portfolio. Furthermore, in oncology, timelines and chances of success will vary a lot from a treatment to another, while public authorities are more focused on some kinds of cancer than on others. For Halaven®, our treatment for metastatic breast cancer, I am really hoping to see this

treatment being included in the public sector’s registries in the near future as I believe breast cancer remains one of the main priorities of both public authorities and the civil society and, in this vein, we are now trying to get national formulary code for Halaven®, which will be the first step before truly negotiating with the different social security institutions.

Lenvima®, which targets differentiated thyroid cancer (DTC), was approved in Mexico with an orphan drug indication. For this treatment, too, we would like it to be eventually included in the public sector’s registries. In this endeavor, we are advocating for a treatment which can make a difference in the patients’ lives.

Considering this context, what is the current commercial strategy of the affiliate?

[related_story]

We currently concentrate our sales force’s efforts on the private market, while we also consider some opportunities in swiftly registering our products in the decentralized social security institutes that operate alongside the three main Mexican institutions – namely IMSS, ISSSTE and Seguro Popular. In terms of promotion, most of the physicians who are active in the private sector also hold responsibilities in the public field. As a result, it is absolutely paramount we manage to further consolidate and strengthen our reputation among these physicians, who would play a critical role once our products will be available in the public sector.

Our growth strategy is already well established: within the next few years, we are focused on maximizing the commercial potential of our current portoflio. Halaven® and Lenvima® have received additional important indications in other countries. In May 2016, the FDA, for example, approved Lenvima®, in combination with everolimus, for the treatment of patients with advanced Renal Cell Carcinoma following one prior anti-angiogenic therapy. Similarly, in the US, Halaven® received approval for the treatment of patients with unresectable or metastatic liposarcoma who have received a prior anthracycline-containing regimen in January 2016. By seeking regulatory approvals for these new indications in Mexico as well, we want to steadily expand our scope of action in the country.

Are you also considering inorganic growth opportunities to expand your portfolio in Mexico?

Mexico stands a very strategic market for the group. Our headquarters hold great expectations for the Mexican affiliate, and they give us the opportunity to consider various growth options to meet their expectations.

Strategic partnership is one of them. We are open to consider local strategic partnership opportunities through which we could deliver the additional value to our customers – patients, their families, healthcare professionals and payers, and also with which we could complement our portfolio.

In this regard, our focus on oncology may appeal to potential business partners: we already hold an experienced sales force that is fully dedicated to this therapeutic area and focused on consolidating a strong relationship with Mexican oncologists.

Prior to joining Eisai, you were general manager of Shire Mexico. What do you see as the critical success factors when setting up and developing an affiliate?

My experience at Shire provided me with a great overview of the challenges I now face at the helm of Eisai. When you set up a country affiliate, it is absolutely critical to anticipate the transition between the initial “startup phase” and the more mature development phase of the structure.

When setting up an affiliate, general managers’ efforts are mostly concentrated on putting the affiliate right on tracks, while they naturally face a certain pressure to start commercial operations as soon as possible. Nevertheless, it is important to establish your “post-startup” strategy as from the first years of operation of the affiliate. If you don’t anticipate this transition, it is very likely the affiliate will experience a certain disruption once it will reach a more advanced level of development. The bigger an affiliate becomes, the more demanding the market is, so you have to ensure you hold the resources to meet this heightened demand – otherwise both your employees and your partners will be frustrated by your delivery.

> Eisai’s penetration strategy in Mexico appears to me extremely wise: instead of bringing all of our portfolios at once, we concentrate on oncology and look at fully maximizing this portfolio and building a solid and experienced team before moving to the next development step

Only a couple of years after commencing business operations in Mexico, my objective is also to navigate our teams develop themselves in the same directions and our employees are only focused on their very own responsibilities. As general manager, I have to build the vision and create the required harmony that would ensure all our employees pursue the same long-term objective. In this vein, Eisai’s penetration strategy in Mexico appears to me extremely wise: instead of bringing all of our portfolios at once, we concentrate on oncology and look at fully maximizing this portfolio and building a solid and experienced team before moving to the next development step.

Eisai is the new kid of the block in Mexico’s oncology landscape. As we say, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” How do you want to position Eisai among your medical and public partners to make a success of this introduction of Eisai to Mexican stakeholders?

Talking about the medical community, we position ourselves as an innovative, patient-centric company. Although we are relatively new in the Mexican market, I want us to be seen as a solution provider in the area of oncology. In Mexico, cancer is a growing burden affecting more and more Mexicans, as our epidemiological profile continues to evolve and our population keeps growing and aging. In this regard, Eisai is part of a team – alongside with physicians, patient advocacy groups and payers – which tries to find the most impactful solutions to better meet the needs of our patients.

See more interviews