Interview: Guillermo Hernando Gómez Vásquez – Managing Director Zona Andina, Siemens Healthineers, Colombia



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Guillermo Gómez, managing director of the Andean region at Siemens Healthineers discusses Colombia's evolution in terms of access to healthcare and investment in life-saving medical equipment, as well as the role Healthineers can play in reducing healthcare system costs and easing patient access.

Those are exiting times for Siemens as in May of last year, Bernd Montag unveiled Siemens Healthcare's bold new branding as Siemens Healthineers. This follows, as part of the Vision 2020 strategy, on decisions to manage the healthcare business as a separate entity with a new organisational setup. Much of this coincides with your own appointment almost two years ago as managing director for the Andean Region. How has this internal restructuring impacted the Colombian operations?

While the transformation began a little over two years ago on a global level, in the region we have only started to implement it some months afterwards. I view this change as a true opportunity to create a company in the healthcare sector that is different and free from boundaries we were under in the past. We now have the means to face the numerous challenges present in the health systems of this world, amongst those, Colombia.

Our clients in Colombia have been very positive in their reception of the evolution of our company. Most of the region has as well received the changes in a positive manner, although the implementation has been more difficult in some places and even impossible in some countries to this date.

Siemens Healthineers is notable for its very broad portfolio encompassing medical imaging, laboratory diagnostics, therapy systems and your healthcare IT and digital ecosystem platform. How does the local offering present itself today?

Today, the whole portfolio of Siemens Healthineers is available in Colombia. Of course, some of our lines perform better than others. The in vivo high-tech diagnosis systems are still the best performers, mostly because we have been providing them for about 50 years. While they remain the most important area for us, the in vitro part of the business in which we are in comparison fairly new with only ten years of experience is expected to display the fastest growth in the next years. From it we plan to also drive the growth of Healthineers as a whole, as we aim for a growth superior to that of seven or eight percent of the market.

Another area that holds importance for us is digitalisation. This is a crucial area to invest and demonstrate presence in as it will be indispensable for the healthcare systems of the future, holding the potential for better prevention and targeted programmes.

Indeed, Siemens Healthineers is a pioneer in shaping the digital transformation of healthcare worldwide. Just how receptive is Colombia’s life sciences sector to digital disruption?

It is still a challenge to implement digitalisation in Colombia, although it is the best performing country in the zone, Brazil and Mexico growing somewhat faster. There are many entities in Colombia, promoting different incentive structures. For instance, we do not have one unifying data centre. The pace of our move in the way of digitalisation will depend on the government politics. This will be much needed, as I do not believe we will be able to grow faster in our aim for digitalisation without the corresponding political regulations.

At a time when Colombia's peace process is progressing and rural parts of the country are becoming more integrated, what role has Siemens in leveraging technology to ensure better healthcare coverage and better level of coverage?

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Our technology can have a big impact in ameliorating the access to healthcare. However, I believe that technology is not the problem. The real problem we are facing in access to healthcare is the education of the human resources active in the healthcare area. Often, you will be able to bring the technology to the remote areas, but you will be unable to encounter the professionals to handle the equipment in the right way. Therefore, although it is true that the peace process has allowed for technology to venture into areas previously inaccessible, the impact would be majorated by trained human resources in those areas.

What role can Siemens then play in ensuring the education of said professionals?

Siemens Healthineers can provide the supervisors of the system with support but not with the thorough background knowledge required to make the right decisions. This is simply not our responsibility and has to be taken care of early on, at university. We can provide the government with a support system thanks to our great global network and the experience in training our own young people. Nonetheless, if the education system in not guaranteed from early on, our impact is limited.

What strategic priorities are you focusing on at the moment?

We consider that it is time to change the relationship between the technology and the healthcare providers in order to see the healthcare providers become more productive and reduce the overall cost of healthcare. We have been working on various projects involving technology solutions in the past that successfully aimed to take costs out of the system.

Five years ago, we worked with Imbanaco Medical Center in Cali. on the construction of their new facility. Together with the architectural company in charge we examined the design of the clinic together. Our focus was on reducing the number of movements for the patient within the clinic in order to impact the efficiency of the whole institution. Today, if you visit the clinic you will get the impression that it is not fully occupied. The truth is, it has a 95 percent occupancy rate just as any other in Colombia.

What is your assessment on prevention in Colombia?

It is no secret, that good prevention has a decisive effect on the reduction of costs in the system in the long term. In Colombia, not all insurance companies have come to find a solution in implementing this yet. One reason for this is that in order to make an informed decision on a prevention programme you will need a data breakdown and the ability to analyse it. These are crucial elements that are still missing in Colombia.

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At Siemens Healthineers, we launched our first prevention programme with a northern Colombian insurance company in the area of diabetes, and the responses have been very positive. We are planning on new programme launches within the next years.

The public discussion often revolves around the short-term upfront cost versus the long-term benefits of medical devices and the improvement of life quality that they bring to patients. How has this discussion evolved from your point of view over the last years?

This is never an easy discussion, and Colombia is no exception in that regard. We have to attend many meetings and organise a multitude of congresses where we can demonstrate the future savings. An example for this laborious dialogue came with PET (Positron Emission Tomography). This is a very expensive procedure to identify cancer. Thus, it was difficult to bring the first such device to the country as no one saw the benefit of the system. However, after a few meetings with the government, we were able to bring the system to Colombia and can now see the results: 30 percent of the patients with cancer diagnosis changed their treatment for the better thanks to the PET. Today, PET is a standard technology in Colombia, although it is still expensive, it saves money in the system and increases the quality of life of the patients.

What sets Siemens apart from its competitors?

Our competitors vary whether you consider the in vivo or in vitro segment. On many points, our differentiation is just our technology. However, what really sets us apart and gives us our edge is our post-sales support. We are committed not only to the maintenance of the equipment, but also to the desire to truly ameliorate the performance of our clients.

What strategic priorities are you pursuing within the coming years?

We are amongst the very top leaders in our sector in Colombia. My goal is to maintain that position by not only focusing on our technology but also our relationship to the customer. I aim to see Siemens Healthineers be the perfect partner to its clients by aligning our goals with theirs.

Mr. Gómez, you have been with the company for 25 years. What has kept you here?

There is no other company like Siemens. I thoroughly believe, that in Siemens Healthineers, everything is possible. It will provide you with the perfect support system for all of your successful enterprises.

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