Interview: Tania Mori Lucero – Executive Director, National Institute of Public Research, Ecuador

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27.03.2018

Tags: Ecuador, INSPI, KOL, Healthcare, Research, PPP

Tania Mori Lucero, executive director of the Ecuadorian National Institute of Public Research (INSPI), details the entity's role in supporting the elaboration of public health policies under the Ministry of Public Health's umbrella. Mori highlights the important progress that has been made in the country's research ecosystem and documents the lack of private-public research collaboration in Ecuador.

Ms. Mori, you were appointed as INSPI's executive Director in November 2016. Could you tell our readers about your main achievements since taking over the position?

I believe that the most important improvement that must be highlighted is the strengthening the relationship we have with the Ministry of Public Health (MSP) in all parts of the national institute of public research (INSPI). We are an organization under the umbrella of the MSP that works as a national laboratory of reference to help the MSP grasp a better understanding of the disease burden that the country is confronted to. The recommendations that we formulate following our scientific and technical work are used to improve the MSP's public health policies.

Also, INSPI has built strong links with the country's best scientific and medical universities to facilitate the integration of scientists into the institute. As a result of these collaborations, we have been able to increase the level of competency and operational ability of INPSI's employees, which in turn has led to more efficient research for the benefit of the government and Ecuadorians.

Indeed, this strengthened level of collaboration with universities has allowed us to develop research in terms of public health to a further extent. Furthermore, I believe that we have demonstrated the institute's ability to deliver perceptible results.

Could you clarify how this contributes to delivering better healthcare to Ecuadorians?

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INSPI is an institution attached to the MSP and collaborates with all the other institutions contributing to the MSP's mission of developing health policies and improving the national health system. We are actively contributing to the development of research in transmittable and non-transmittable diseases in Ecuador.

INSPI follows three strategic axes namely, the generation of knowledge, increasing the efficiency of services of National Laboratories and disseminating knowledge. Since Ecuador is a tropical country, it is confronted to a vast range of tropical diseases, such as Zika, Yellow fever or H1N1. Thus, our role is to analyze the type, subtype or genotype of infectious agents circulating in the country. We then present our results to the MSP, which can then proceed with an informed choice in terms of public health policy.

Finally, we disseminate knowledge relevant to our research in international scientific publications. As we develop more investigation and products are chosen for the purpose of public health, our recommendations help improve the government's reactivity to the potential outbreak of a disease. INSPI's investigation work has an input in the elaboration of national prevention campaigns.

What do you see as the main strength of the Ecuadorian public health system?

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Ecuador's MSP has genuinely taken its commitment of becoming the supervisor of the country's public health. In recent years, the MSP has positioned itself as the privileged interlocutor for any questions related to public health in a much more open manner than in the past. Additionally, the government is working hard towards the implementation of international standards within its institutions. As a result, the community's access to health has improved and I believe that the public healthcare sector has strengthened a lot. Also, the mechanisms of collaborations between the actors of the public healthcare system have improved. We have increased the exchange of information with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), other international organizations. Finally, while we are merely one of the MSP's national public laboratories at the service of public health and Ecuadorians.

Since the institution is much needed by both the government and the population, we have received a lot of support from the governmental level. The public authority's help is not only directed at INSPI, but also towards other institutions such as universities to ensure that students could contribute to the development of science and technologies in Ecuador.

What is your perspective on the status of research in Ecuador?

The research system and its contribution to the healthcare system have improved a lot recently. We have witnessed an increase in the number of investigations and the government's efforts to improve the remuneration of researchers across the country have played a big part in this regard. Indeed, the logical continuation of Ecuador's government investments in human development of researchers in the country, was investment in the material resources to accompany their research and retain the best talents by paying them a sensible amount of money to conduct research that is beneficial for the country. In a nutshell, I would say that the governmental support has improved at all levels, including the smaller national-level research project.

The technologies used by Ecuadorian scientist has also improved, as they have in almost the entire Latin American continent. Also, many of our employees have been given the opportunity to study abroad with scholarships, which has allowed them to improve their technical skills.

Support from the MSP and international organizations, such as WHO/PAHO, has been invaluable for the past 40 years. Collaborating with them has allowed us to benefit from technology transfers and we are currently looking to reinforce their contribution to public health.

Which are INSPI's areas of focus?

We have been working as a national laboratory for the past 70 years which the special focus on microbiology. Nonetheless, our focus of research has gradually expanded towards non-communicable metabolic diseases and in the last two years the institute has also conducted several toxicological studies, climate change related research.

To what extend does INSPI collaborate with the private pharmaceutical sector?

Our interaction with the pharmaceutical industry limits itself to the purchase of products relative to our research. While we are not opposed to working with laboratories, we will have to consult which type of future opportunities are beneficial to the government and our mission of support.

Currently, we are spending a lot of resources in attempt to develop Ecuadorian based innovation. We are following a step-by-step approach to develop our own products, but the most efficient way

to strengthen these collaborations is to articulate efforts between the public and private sector.

Having said this, INSPI has recently concretized a number of investigation agreements with several Ecuadorian foundations- Learning to Live with Diabetes Foundation (FUVIDA) being one of them. These collaborations are helping us advance the status of research and local knowledge about non-communicable diseases.

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