Margarita Lopez Acosta – General Manager, Sanofi Spain



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Sanofí's general manager for Spain, Margarita Lopez Acosta, comments on the company's "Play to Win" strategy, the presence of the French giant in Spain and the leading role of the country in clinical trials. She also explains possible solutions to the challenges around access to innovation in Spain.

You have been with Sanofi for a long time, working in different positions within the Spanish affiliate as well as in Sweden. What can you share with our audience about your career in the industry?

I am passionate about people's health. I have been working for more than 35 years with several companies and in different positions. I started working in the quality assurance field before moving to the commercial side of the business. My objective was to understand the business from the perspective of healthcare professionals and patients.

In 2003, I decided to join Sanofi and I was offered to move to Paris to lead the marketing and business effectiveness team for Europe. Then, in 2011, I returned to Spain when the company was creating a multicultural organisation to lead the diabetes business both for Spain and for Portugal. In 2016, we went through different verticalized reorganisations internally. That is when I took over and was appointed Country Lead for Spain.

Can you explain the company's presence in Spain and the strategic importance of the affiliate for the group?

The Spanish affiliate's headquarters are in Barcelona, but we also have offices in Madrid and an industrial centre in Girona area for which we are celebrating its 50 years' anniversary this year. Also, almost 6 years ago, Sanofi worldwide opted for Spain to establish the Global Innovation Centre, an international hub aimed to be an strategic site for Sanofi worldwide in terms of digital transformation, supply chain solutions or big data management. Data is the backbone for the Sanofi digital transformation, with the goal of enabling real time data driven decisions.

What about the product portfolio and the strategy being shared with you by headquarters?

Sanofi has gone through a transformation in deciding and prioritising the pipeline. The company has, nowadays, four different business units: vaccines, specialty care, general medicines and consumer health care. This configuration is part of a new strategy led by our CEO, Paul Hudson, and called "Play to Win". This strategy started in 2020 and has a roadmap that goes up to 2025 with a clear objective: to leverage breakthrough science and to transform the practice of medicine.

To achieve so, we have four key pillars focused on growth, lead through innovation, accelerate efficiency and reinvent the way we work. The decision taken around R&D was to really bring best-in-class and/or first-in-class molecules, particularly in specialty care and inflammatory diseases.

Patients remain our common purpose and to improve their quality of life, we aim to bring best-in-class molecules. We are all focused on ensuring this, by chasing the miracles of science.

How is it that Sanofi, the worldwide leader in vaccines, has not yet been able to bring its own COVID-19 vaccine to patients? How should we interpret that?

The company has played an important role to fight against the pandemic, supporting other companies to help them producing their respective vaccines taking profit of our industrial technology and capacity. Apart from that, Sanofi has also worked hard to ensure that the company's treatments – especially those considered essential by the WHO – continue to reach patients.

Back to your question, when you work in science, sometimes, projects do not deliver what they are expected to. Since COVID-19 cases began to multiply exponentially in China, Sanofi decided to take advantage of the knowledge and experience of many years working in vaccines to try to find a dose that let us protect people from the virus. It took us much more time than what we would have liked but the vaccine we have investigated and developed in collaboration with GSK is currently under evaluation at the European healthcare authorities' level.

What is going on in the healthcare system in Spain? Are there any trends we should know about?

Both the Spanish healthcare system and its healthcare professionals are strongly recognised worldwide, which has opened great opportunities in R&D and clinical trials for new treatments for high impact therapeutic areas such as oncology. In fact, Sanofi Spain has become an outstanding affiliate, carrying out trials from phase I to phase IV. However, we must continue working hard alongside the authorities to see that the innovation that starts with clinical trials goes all the way to patients afterwards. In other words, we must make innovation accessible. At the moment we face challenges around pricing and reimbursement, too.

It is challenging to convince headquarters to invest in clinical trials in a country when do you not have the possibility to launch the product later on. We are trying to find the best approach together by understanding the strengths that this country has and the fact that the system needs to be sustainable.

The Spanish healthcare system is considered one of the most generous in the world which sometimes can bring challenges around access to innovation since resources are finite. What is the solution to this?

There is not only one solution. First of all, it should be noted that, the pharmaceutical sector is one of the growth drivers of the Spanish economy. According to Farmaindustria, our trade association, our investment in R&D in Spain in 2020 exceeded 1.16 billion euros. We are also a strategic sector that delivers a high level of qualified employment: more than 44,000 direct employees.

Based on this, if your question is if we want this country to be pioneering and referent within the health care environment, I think that, to go on the right direction, the value of our sector must be acknowledged, especially between agents involved.

As a woman, leading one of the most important companies in the sector and in an industry that is so male dominated, what will be your advice to other women looking to succeed in this industry?

Sanofi is very proud of its diversity numbers because more than 53 percent of our organisation are women, and when we look at the leadership of the affiliate, that percentage is above 60. Nevertheless, we are currently facing similar challenges as other industries which is making sure that these women are having the right opportunities. We need to create the right workplace and provide the flexibility for them to be able to continue their careers in different positions.

Diversity is one of the key elements in our DNA here at Sanofi, and not only when it comes to gender balance. We are strongly committed to diversity in terms of cultures, having the privilege of being able to have people from more than 40 nationalities working altogether; and in terms of age. It is not only about young talents, but also about senior people.

There are different ways of seeing things, different mindsets involved. Rather than the difficulties we had in the past around differences, we have to build on the richness of this diversity.

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