

Sandra Ramirez - Latin America Area Lead, Astellas Pharma



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Latin America (LatAm) Area Lead for Astellas Sandra Ramirez outlines the Japanese company's presence in the region, its efforts to partner with local stakeholders to improve patient access, and the consolidation of its operations in the priority market of Mexico.

Sandra, you joined Astellas only recently. Can you begin by explaining what encouraged you to join the company?

I have been at Astellas for four months and I am very excited about the opportunity. The first reason I decided to join the organization was to gain experience working for a Japanese company. This was an important point for me—to learn about the culture and the company's unique approach. The second reason was Astellas' portfolio; the quality of the products the company has now along with those it will bring forward in the future. Lastly, I joined because of my experience during the interview process where I had the opportunity to meet with senior management and I was very impressed with the organization. All these factors resonated with me and influenced my decision.

LatAm falls within Astellas' international markets. How is the region organized and how long has Astellas been present there?

Astellas has been around for more than 126 years all over the world, so it has a long history of dedication to patients. With respect to LatAm, I am responsible for all LatAm markets except for Brazil. In the region, we have offices in Mexico and Colombia, and we will open offices in Argentina and Chile soon. Our presence in Colombia dates from 2016 and in Mexico from 2020.

The LatAm arm of Astellas is still relatively new. Are there plans to open more affiliates in the region?

Yes, we are planning to continue growing in LatAm markets. This is one of our priorities. We have identified opportunities and the responsibility we have in these markets to support patients and for this reason, we are planning to extend our presence in the future in the Argentina and Chile Markets.

You have vast experience in LatAm and must be drawing on that experience at Astellas. Looking at the region from your current position, what are the opportunities and difficulties of these markets?

I have worked quite a bit with LatAm markets before, especially with Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela and have also managed different projects in other markets in Latin America and Canada. I believe that LatAm as a region offers many opportunities for innovation. The key point and the biggest responsibility for us in this region is to continue working to identify better options for access to resolve the most critical situations for patients.

In addition, we learned a lot from the pandemic and better understood that healthcare is not a privilege, but a necessity for everyone. As a leader in LatAm, we need to continue working independently from the position that we have in the healthcare system to identify alternatives and to be proactive in providing opportunities so that more patients can receive the right treatment at the right moment. This is something that we need to continue working on and it is one of my biggest priorities. To do this we need to understand how we can work with different stakeholders in the region and how we can partner with institutions to ensure that patients can access care.

You mentioned the effect of the pandemic on companies' awareness of the need to improve healthcare, but what about government initiatives in the region?

We know there are many challenges for different stakeholders, including the government, as a part of this process. We understand that we need more time to cover the existing gaps in patient access. This is a responsibility for everyone, both the community and its leaders, to continue working and to identify alliances and the best way to work together as part of this process.

What can you tell us about payers in the countries you manage? Do they have a hybrid public/private model and how does it work?

Considering the fact that we have very specialized products, we offer them in both private and public markets, and we work to ensure patients get access regardless of the channel. In Mexico, we are collaborating with the government and different institutions. Also, we are building important partnerships to support healthcare providers so that they can get to know our products and can know more about the science behind them.

In Colombia, we are working with health maintenance organizations (HMOs), with logistics operators, and with medical societies in order to support patients. As a part of this process, it is also a priority for us to work with distributors, and with civil societies and the community. We have a commitment to collaborating with different stakeholders in this process, networking with the various actors in the system to ensure that we can accelerate the timing for patients to receive treatments.

Is LatAm part of Astellas' multicentre clinical trials?

LatAm is a priority for clinical trials. We have important R&D activities in Japan, the US and Europe, and LatAm is also very important in the investigation of our different therapies. As we mentioned, we are working in the oncology arena, and we are also identifying new opportunities in immunology and gene therapy—these areas are a priority for us worldwide. To ensure that we provide access to patients, we need to ensure what we have the capacity to hold clinical trials in our markets.

Compared to other regions, would you say that there are good centres and solid infrastructures in LatAm?

There are some very important and very sophisticated centres in LatAm. We can see this kind of centre in different Countries in Latin America such as Brazil, Mexico, Colombia and Argentina with very high-quality service and physicians at the level of top international institutions across the world. In LatAm, we have seen major progress in clinical trials, in the quality of the centres available and especially the level of the physicians and the level of science we can bring to patients in these countries.

You mentioned collaborating with different stakeholders, including patient groups. What can you tell us about patient organizations in LatAm? Do they have a strong voice?

In LatAm patient groups are very well organized. There are many kinds of patient organizations, that go from educational organizations to advocacy groups. Most of them also have alliances with European organizations or with US organizations.

They take initiative and have contact with governments, therefore, they do have a voice and they participate in different discussions within the public arena. They have taken part, for example, in the creation of the healthcare plan in Colombia. However, I think there is an opportunity for them to work together on projects with regional impact across LatAm.

Speaking of politics, the political environment can be quite volatile in the LatAm region. How do you ensure stability at Astellas?

Before I respond to this question, I would like to summarize a point related to patient partnerships: the fact that we are working on a long-term strategy and the priority for us is to identify what we can do in the long run. Regarding your question about the political environment and the changes in the different countries because there is continuous change, our purpose is to work in alliance with the different governments, independent of their political ideology, identifying the best way to create alliances, keeping in mind that the priority is the patient. We are always open to evaluating different models to ensure access, adapting to the conditions of the market, its regulatory context, and the financial context of the country. That is key for operating at the highest standards of ethics and compliance with the different governments and institutions across these markets.

Mexico has become a priority market. What are the other priorities for Astellas in the region and what opportunities do you see ahead?

The number one priority for us is to continue providing innovation to LatAm patients in each country, based on the conditions of that country while keeping in mind that the most important actor in this process is the patient. The second priority, which is related to the business, is to continue developing our LatAm markets and open our offices in Argentina and Chile. That will be happening over the next few months. And continue to identify opportunities to grow our priority market, Mexico,

Finally, one of our most important responsibilities is to develop talent in the Astellas organization, promote diversity and inclusion as a key element for innovation, and recognize every day that we have an outstanding team to support this organization.

Are there challenges ahead?

There are challenges every day, but we need to convert these challenges into opportunities. As leader of this organization, that is a major commitment of mine.

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