Interview with Carlos Manuel González Parra, General Manager, Novo Nordisk Colombia



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Carlos Manuel González Parra discusses the progress Novo Nordisk has made as a newcomer to the Colombian market and its hopes and intentions for the future. One of the main focuses is in manoeuvring Novo Nordisk Colombia into a position where they will be a key player in the diabetes and hemophilia segments of the sector.

You spent 14 years at Bayer; what opportunities did you see in moving to Novo Nordisk?

Firstly, I saw a personal challenge to establish the Novo Nordisk affiliate in Colombia. Secondly, I realized the potential of Novo Nordisk's performance and pipeline in the next ten or twenty years, and that it could be one of the best pipelines in the future. Thirdly, I discovered that this is a real patient-oriented company. The organization believes that their foundation is to improve the quality of life of the patient and they truly do this. Having been here for almost three years, I know that it was the right decision to establish the company in Colombia.

What have been some of the main milestones you have achieved since joining Novo Nordisk in 2010?

The creation of the Colombian affiliate is of course the main milestone. The hiring of the executive team was quite a challenge as well. Novo Nordisk now has 100 percent of the coverage in the main cities in Colombia. The affiliate is covering all doctors and institutions with diabetes and hemophilia patients. We are building the corporate image and awareness of the company in Colombia. In the previous years, Novo Nordisk was not known as well as it is today throughout the country. Last year was the best for us in terms presence in radio, TV, news, etc. Our organization has the commitment to build our reputation as a company, and as a socially responsible entity. These are the main milestones.

What is your assessment of the upcoming health reforms as proposed by Minister Gaviria?

I am positive about these reforms because I believe the Ministry is thinking how they can build medium to long-term sustainability in the system, and thus I believe these reforms are necessary. The big challenge now will be how to implement the reforms. We have some ideas in general terms but Gaviria is facing a challenge regarding sustainability of the system and resources. Furthermore, how will the government manage the corruption? Prices are another big topic. I believe that sustainability will provide long-term businesses in Colombia. During the last ten years, the Colombian economy has grown positively in terms of macro and microeconomic indicators like; inflation, exchange rate, stability, legality and GDP. All of which provide a strong basis to make businesses. Many countries in the world consider Colombia a good opportunity for investment. In the last three to four years, many companies have established operations directed locally, including Novo Nordisk.

What is the importance of PPPs in terms of ensuring a successful healthcare industry?

I believe that multinational companies should be aware of the need to maintain close collaboration with the government. After all, we have to pay a little more in Colombia compared to other countries. Why? I know that most of the companies have been respectful about the laws that the government has issued in the past in terms of prices. This is a dynamic market and the competition had been regulating the market. Colombia still needs a reasonable level of prices. Competition is absolutely necessary, but we need to help the healthcare system to develop and cover people not only with good medication but high quality. Generics are necessary as well; these must also be of the absolute highest quality. Ultimately, we are talking about patients who need the best possible

quality. This is the issue.

Biosimilars are also very important but the law regarding Biosimilars needs to be aligned with the World Health Organization. It is always thinking about the patient, and pharmaceutical companies in Colombia need to give them the best option based on their capacities. Biosimilars and clinical trials need to have good quality, efficacy and safety. I believe that quality is the most important issue. Biosimilars need to show clinical trials due to the fact that these products are very sensitive towards any alteration and their efficacy and safety can be committed even with small and sometimes imperceptible changes in their composition. The patient is the real concern that we have.

Looking at diabetes in Colombia, according to the International Diabetes Foundation, roughly seven percent of the Colombian population has diabetes with an expected five million people by 2025. What is the state of diabetes in Colombia now and is the country adequately prepared to deal with this in the future?

Most of the insurance companies (HMOs) have some programs focused on diabetics, but they are not strong or large enough to cover all patients adequately. Novo Nordisk has been working on this since its inception in Colombia, and we have made solid analysis of the situation. In November 2012 Novo Nordisk launched its first diabetes observatory and this project has already made some serious progresses. We have brought many stakeholders together to discuss an agenda for the government. This is our task for 2013. In terms of figures, stakeholders need to determine how much money the government will spend in the future if they do not have real or adequate treatment for patients considering the number of diseases associated with diabetes. There are many complications. Our company carried out a survey regarding the knowledge of diabetes locally. The affiliate compiled data on the situation throughout six months. It was amazing to discover how many people do not understand the real impact of diabetes. Colombia has to do a lot of work if we want to prepare our country to manage diabetes adequately within the next ten years.

Do you see the need for any value-added services alongside diabetes products that would help companies like Novo Nordisk to attend to these issues?

Last year Novo Nordisk created a training program for healthcare professionals called Diabetes Academy. The affiliate trained more than 1,800 doctors. This year we will train more than 2,200 doctors as part of our plan. The formal training lasts around 14 hours. We are now carrying out weekly training in different locations of the country. Our company has really invested a big part of its budget in this training for healthcare professionals. Our environmental processes also play a critical role. The idea is to create discussion on the best way to focus on diabetes in Colombia through insurance companies. We are building very strong and integrated patient support programs. These involve talking about diabetes, implications of the disease, teaching patients healthy habits, how they need to dramatically change habits and how to involve family. Perhaps one of Novo Nordisk's more innovative ideas for this year is how to involve chefs in Colombia. Restaurants often serve unhealthy food. We are planning to meet with one of the most important chefs in Colombia in order to promote healthier eating habits for the population. You cannot prevent diabetes if you cannot prevent obesity and do not have healthy habits, because they are all directly related.

Which products in your portfolio will be the primary growth drivers for 2013?

Novo Nordisk now has a journal about diabetes. The company has a huge portfolio. Currently we have human insulins for diabetes in Colombia. These are very low-price, cheaper than one cup of coffee. Modern insulins are now also present and are included in the mandatory list. Novo Nordisk was one of the most important stakeholders that pushed this inclusion. This is cost-effective for the Colombian healthcare system. If you have this kind of product in the mandatory list you can treat patients more effectively. We have more insulin such as Levemir or NovoRapid, which are used once a day showing very fast results in both types of diabetes. This year we will launch Victoza, one of the most important products used in the United States. Victoza is one of the best products for type-2 diabetes, and works for weight control as well, since many diabetes medications increase the weight of the patient. Novo Nordisk is currently conducting clinical trials for obesity, and we will get this indication in 2-3 years. For diabetes type-2, this will work wonders. If you reduce the patient's weight, the parameters for certain treatments improve rapidly.

Our company has a separate portfolio for hemophilia, where we work with a number of different factors for the disease. I predict that within the next four to five years, Novo Nordisk Colombia will have the organization's entire portfolio present in this country.

Colombia has become one of the most important countries in Latin America. We are part of a group of six countries which our Corporation has chosen to invest in and develop “ahead of the curve”. This means that Colombia has the resources to invest in activities like training healthcare professionals, as well as building an image as a socially responsible company. Building good relationships with its stakeholders and the government is also a main topic. I want the government to be able to confirm that Novo Nordisk is a serious company and that its activities in Colombia are the same as in any other place in the world.

Novo Nordisk Colombia is absolutely aligned with our corporate strategy and is receiving plenty of support from the headquarters to ensure that this affiliate will have the best practices compared to the rest of the world. I can see a difference. I have been in the company for a short while, but last year I went to Copenhagen eight times and have been involved with numerous training sessions since I started to work here. As the first employee of the company in Colombia, it was fundamental to transmit the Novo Nordisk way to all of the employees. I think that I have been successful in instilling the Novo Nordisk message into the blood of our local employees. We have our own “Ten Principles”: the first is the patient, and the last is that we never compromise our business ethics. These two pillars build the framework for the organization.

If we return to Colombia in five years, where can we expect to find Novo Nordisk Colombia?

In five years, I expect Novo Nordisk to be the most important diabetes player in Colombia. The company’s ambition in five years is to reach leadership in the diabetes market through a very strong portfolio and solid investment in terms of training, education for healthcare professionals, good relationships with HMOs and working with them as real partners to help patients. When I communicate with the presidents of the HMOs, the conversation is always focused on the patient, and usually this does result in solid cooperation. The goals of Novo Nordisk Colombia will not be easy to reach because the affiliate will have good competitors, but we have portfolio building capacity and support from the headquarters to become one of the most important companies.

You have been through a challenging process, bringing Novo Nordisk to Colombia. What do you want to personally achieve in the next ten years?

Thinking locally, in ten years we should be able to say that we were part of the implementation of diabetes laws. We should also be able to talk not only about our success in the treatment of diabetes but all aspects related to it such as food or exercise. In the future we will be able to say

that we were part of this. Of course we will have to make many efforts to reach this objective.

Additionally, we want the government to think that Novo Nordisk is the best partner to improve the lives of diabetes patients. We will have brought the best practices for diabetes treatments from around the world to Colombia.

What is your final message on behalf of Novo Nordisk Colombia for our international readers?

I believe that our real concern is the patient. All our activities and concerns are focused on improving the quality of life of diabetes and hemophilia patients, inflammation patients being a third possibility in the future. We aim to be the best partner for the government and all our stakeholders.

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