Interview: Carlos Rivera-Vélez – Vice President & General Manager, Edwards Lifesciences Puerto Rico



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Edwards Lifesciences has been operating its Puerto Rican facilities in the town of Añasco since 1972. Carlos Rivera-Vélez, vice president and general manager of Edwards Puerto Rico, discusses the company's production for hemodynamic monitoring and vascular devices and its contribution to the Puerto Rican economy.

Will there be a greater focus on medical technology in Puerto Rico now and in the future, given its faster growth rate than pharmaceuticals?

The medical device industry generates 19,500 jobs for the Puerto Rican economy. Considering that the medical technology sector makes up 25 percent of manufacturing employment, not to mention the large indirect economic impact those employees have in sustaining other jobs in the region, the medical device industry is a key component of Puerto Rico's economy.

The city of Añasco has many medical device manufacturers and the West Coast of Puerto Rico is scattered with such companies, all of which are growing solidly. I worked with industry leaders to create an industrial council for Añasco, which is mainly composed of medical device companies, to help strengthen and advance manufacturing in the region.

Edwards manufactures over 700 products here in Añasco; what makes them so innovative and allows them to enjoy such high market share?

Edwards' devices are highly complex in nature. For some devices, there is no machine we can use to automate the process – instead, it requires manual intervention by highly skilled operators. The devices made in Puerto Rico are distributed around the world. We place high priority on quality, and have processes in place for ensuring quality systems. These products are made with proud hands in Puerto Rico and used in hundreds of countries around the world.

Is the innovation of Edwards a reflection of vascular and heart diseases increasing worldwide?

Edwards focuses its research on creating innovative solutions for unmet needs. For example, transcatheter heart valve technology allows patients who are too ill or at high risk for surgery to be treated using a minimally invasive approach. Whereas open-heart surgery requires stopping the heart and connecting the patient to a heart-lung bypass machine, the TAVR procedure can be done on a beating heart in a cath lab or hybrid OR. Edwards pioneered TAVR technology for solving this unmet need, and our product is the market leader in this type of procedure.

In 2012, Edwards invested in a $34 million expansion to grow this facility in Añasco. Three years later, what has been the effect of that investment?

Our investments have focused on supporting the current vertical integration strategy while ensuring that current manufacturing and assembly processes are done in an effective and productive way. We invested a lot in ensuring that the sterilization business was a top, world-class operation. Our latest investment was also in sterilization, for a state-of-the-art extraction technology that allows us to work more independently and efficiently. We have also invested in capital infrastructure.

In addition, Edwards has invested heavily in ensuring all our products and processes are top quality. We strive to achieve excellence in our manufacturing processes and we notice that many countries today are taking cues from Puerto Rico. We work together with Añasco's medical device cluster to benchmark and help each other.

Where else does Edwards have manufacturing facilities?

Edwards manufactures in the Dominican Republic, Utah, California, Switzerland and in Singapore. In Japan we have some packaging and labelling operations.

What motivates you to come to work every day?

I am motivated to serve patients. We are helping save peoples' lives. Regardless of whether you work in medical devices or pharmaceuticals, being able to save lives without being a doctor is a very strong feeling. Secondly, for my Puerto Rican country, doing anything that can help Puerto Rico contribute to the world is very important. Coming here every day and ensuring a world-class operation and working together to save lives is a strong source of inspiration.

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