Interview: Noel J. Aymat – Chancellor, UPR Medical Sciences Campus, Puerto Rico



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The chancellor of the Medical Sciences Campus of the University of Puerto Rico discusses the medical R&D projects the university is currently involved in, the fields in which the island has the most potential, and how the institution is tailoring its academic offer to suit the local needs of the pharmaceutical industry and attract more investment.

As chancellor of the campus what is your assessment of the state of medical education in Puerto Rico today?

Puerto Rico's medical education is renowned on the island as well as outside for its quality and excellence. This is not isolated to our campus. The level of our graduates is very high and the feedback we get is mostly very positive. This may be due to the more limited number of options the island offers compared to other places, so people have to work harder to achieve their objectives and programs are very competitive.

One of the challenges Puerto Rico faces is that its young talent is being attracted by companies in the US and elsewhere. What are the key steps that need to be taken to ensure this talent is retained?

We are very interested in retaining our professionals, but we will always have a percentage of our graduates leaving the island and pursuing their careers elsewhere, primarily on the mainland. That will not change, no matter what we do, as it is a natural phenomenon. We hope that these individuals shine wherever they are, and that they reflect the quality of our education. Actually, we keep tight links to graduates. Regarding Puerto Ricans in the mainland, a good example is Daniel Colon-Ramos, who is Puerto Rican and today teaches at the Yale School of Medicine. Thanks to his ties to the island, we recently signed an agreement between Yale University and the University of Puerto Rico for a joint program, and Daniel was the engine to make it happen on their side. Also, most of our graduates work or operate in Latin or Spanish-speaking communities, who are often underserved. I do not see them as a loss, but rather providing a service to a community that needs them.

Puerto Rico is historically renowned for its manufacturing capacities. Given the infrastructure and the talent available there is room to focus on R&D. What are some of the fields in which Puerto Rico excels?

One of our most important fields is cancer. Puerto Rico relies on a comprehensive cancer center, which is not part of the University of Puerto Rico but has close links with it. We actually have three university officials sitting on the cancer center's board. Interestingly, this center intends to combine research and clinical care, as we expect it to be the site of many clinical trials, especially after the inauguration of a new facility in 2016.

What are some of the most exciting projects currently ongoing in terms of clinical research at this campus?

Currently we have several clinical trials running at the university. We have been working extensively on asthma in recent years, as many children suffer from this disease in Puerto Rico. Another exciting field is obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). We have a very successful researcher working here in OCD, which has received several grants and published in *Nature*. Alcohol and cocaine addiction are also very interesting fields of research as well as HIV, neuroscience, pregnancy and diabetes, as Puerto Ricans – and generally speaking Hispanics – have a high prevalence of diabetes. Hence, a lot is going on in different fields.

According to recent estimates, USD 5 billion is expected to be invested in clinical trials in Puerto Rico in the future. For this reason we started offering a post-doctorate and master's in clinical research to prepare doctors in clinical research. This bet is paying off: the program is very popular and is always filled. We also created the Puerto Rico Clinical and Translational Research

Consortium, a collaborative effort among the three major health research and training institutions on the island, i.e. the University of Puerto Rico Medical Sciences Campus, the Universidad Central del Caribe and Ponce School of Medicine and Health Sciences.

Could you elaborate a bit on what the university is doing in terms of research related to HIV?

Over the past fifteen years the campus has been focusing on HIV and pregnancy, among other aspects. One of the major achievements was the elimination of mother-to-child transmission. The team developed a protocol, which was highly successful and became the standard of care. Along with four other research centers in the world the University is also working on developing a vaccine for HIV. Others areas related and relevant to HIV are social factors for contagion and effects of HIV infection on neurological system.

To what extent Puerto Rico can become a true hub for medical research in the future?

Some of the factors that can help the island move in this direction are geographic and political ones. Being part of the US grants huge opportunities, as the federal government offers a great amount of support to research. Also, we can rely on state-of-the-art technology, good infrastructure and efficient telecommunications. Last but not least, tax incentives play a critical role. The state government is always looking for new ways to attract R&D to the island and incentivize researchers to carry on their projects locally.

Looking ahead to the future, what are your own expectations about how this campus is going to grow?

I have been in this position only for one year. So far the main challenge has been bureaucracy. Since we are a state university, we have many regulations and sometimes processes are very long and complicated. Research is the number one priority for the campus, but so far we had no dean for this area. Today we are rearranging the organization to make sure we can have one soon. The benefit of having a dean is that he or she would be part of the administrative board of the campus, thus actively participating in its management and decision-making. Also, we are increasingly tailoring the academic offer to the specific needs of the pharmaceutical industry to make sure we can meet their increasing demand for highly qualified personnel. As we progress in these direction, administration of research activity is becoming less burdensome and support is more effective.

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