Interview: Robin Edwards – Plant Manager, Humacao Site, BMS Puerto Rico



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Over the past few years BMS has consolidated its footprint in Puerto Rico to transform the island into a manufacturing hub for both biopharma and pharmaceuticals. The plant manager of the oral solid Humacao plant discusses the current challenges the site is facing as well as the company's future development plans.

Before coming to Puerto Rico you were general manager for technical operations in China and you swapped positions with Yann Cardot. What was the reason behind this move and why were you the right person to take over this facility?

My case shows the BMS strategy in terms of human resources development. I spent many years in China and was looking for alternatives, while Mr. Cardot had been at Humacao for several years. It was a good development opportunity for both to transition to new roles with new responsibilities

Here in Puerto Rico the challenges are different. The Humacao site is very large in terms of facilities, but not in terms of actual manufacturing operations, so the goal is to give this plant the right layout to make sure it can bring us to where we need to be in the future. This site is very much focused on oral solid dose and is a key part of the BMS' network, as we will be producing Eliquis® here, an anticoagulant for the treatment of venous thromboembolic events which is growing very much in terms of demand. Humacao will be the main manufacturing center for Eliquis

® for the whole world. In addition the site has a mandate to become a center of excellence for oral solids for the whole group and in future to also develop technology here.

You have been in Puerto Rico for a couple of months now. What are your initial impressions about the manufacturing capacities of this island?

My initial impressions are that there is a high degree of professional knowledge in the industry. People have a very strong pharmaceutical background with broad experience in the industry and working with different companies. This offers several advantages, such as the ability to develop products locally and a high level of quality.

BMS Puerto Rico aims at becoming a center of excellence in oral solids. How does this fit into the company's repositioning as a biopharmaceutical company?

The BMS biopharma strategy is well known; nonetheless, oral solids will continue to play a significant role in the company's business. We need to make sure we continue to have the expertise to develop new solutions. And Puerto Rico has been a very good platform because of the know-how of people.

One of the main trends we are witnessing is the dwindling R&D pipelines of big pharma, which are very often growing through the acquisition of smaller companies. How is it for BMS and what implications does this have on manufacturing capabilities here in Puerto Rico?

BMS is very focused on R&D with a strong pipeline — and that's one of the big competitive advantages of the company for the future. BMS has split global manufacturing operations in two areas: biological operations and the pharmaceutical operating unit. Furthermore, in Puerto Rico we have two sites: Manatí for biopharma and Humacao for pharmaceuticals.

Today Eliquis® is the main product manufactured at the Humacao site along with other drugs, which are in the end phase of their lifecycle. Currently we are also transferring products from a facility we had in Mount Vernon, IN, which was sold to AstraZeneca. When deciding what are we going to manufacture here in the future we first need to ask ourselves: Can we do it? Should we do it? Do we deserve to do it? If all answers are positive, then we can go for it.

What are the main challenges you are faced with in your new role?

Humacao was originally developed as an API site with a large footprint however, current pharmaceutical operations are relatively small, and thus utilities are oversized. The question

currently is: How do we right-size the infrastructure to support the pharma operating unit? Moreover, power supply can be unreliable. We have back-up generation capabilities for the plant, however the environment bureau limits its use to 50 hours per year. Coming to terms with the culture is also a challenge. I spent eleven years in China, so I'm still understanding what makes people here tick and how to encourage them to move in the right direction to meet future challenges.

Companies are interested in doing more with less and are bringing in a higher degree of automation into manufacturing. How is that applied within the Humacao site?

I think it's a positive trend, if you bring in the right level of automation. You need resources to manage this new technology, which implies more people. We are currently growing our facility in certain areas and as a result the staff required for those operations. The advantage we have today is that we are growing the resources in the right way; that is by hiring people with the right skills we need for the future.

What is the importance of Humacao and Puerto Rico in terms of manufacturing to the global BMS organization?

BMS does not have a large network of production facilities worldwide: For Pharmaceutical Operations we have an API plant in Ireland, a plant here in Puerto Rico, one in Italy, France, China and Japan.

Eliquis® will be supplied from Puerto Rico to the world, which gives this site an important role within the network.

What would you like to achieve in the next five years?

I want this site to be the benchmark in terms of quality, safety costs, and reliability of supply. I'd like to see that within the next two years. It's about being the benchmark not only within the BMS network, but also within the industry.

As Puerto Rico continues to attract more investment from around the world, what is your personal feeling about where the pharmaceutical industry is going collectively?

I have only been here for a couple of months, but I have seen that the island has received large investments in recent years. Puerto Rico has suffered a bit from brain drain to the mainland. Maybe it is a good time for people to come back and start new development opportunities, especially in the field of R&D where I see a lot of potential.

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