Wendy Perry – Executive Managing Director, Merck (MSD) Puerto Rico



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Merck (MSD outside of the USA) is celebrating its 70-year anniversary in Puerto Rico this year. Executive Managing Director Wendy Perry highlights the company's extensive footprint on the island which includes commercial, manufacturing and clinical research operations. She stresses the importance of maintaining a strong commercial presence locally to address the high unmet medical needs of the Puerto Rican population, with a focus on oncology, vaccines, HIV and diabetes. She also talks about Merck's efforts to help vulnerable populations in disaster-stricken areas access life-saving medicines. Finally, as the first woman in her position, she shares advice to future female leaders.

Could you start by introducing our readers to Merck's footprint on the island?

Merck has a long legacy in Puerto Rico. This year, we are celebrating 70 years of commercial operations on the island. Since then, Merck's footprint has grown to include manufacturing and clinical operations in addition to our commercial capabilities in Human Health. Today, we employ more than 500 people altogether, considering our commercial site in Carolina and our manufacturing plant in Las Piedras built in 1985. The facility produces nine products distributed to 75 countries globally: Belsomra, Atozet, Janumet, Ribavirin, Clarinex, Temodar, Zetia, and Segluromet.

With regards to clinical research, we are currently conducting 14 clinical trials in 45 sites around the island, in multiple therapeutic areas, including cardiology, HIV, women's health, vaccines and oncology. In this endeavour, we work closely with the different organizations driving clinical research on the island such as the Puerto Rico Science, Technology & Research Trust and the Puerto Rico Consortium for Clinical Investigation (PRCC), Comprehensive Cancer Center and individual investigators committed to strengthening the research ecosystem in PR. We recognize the need to increase the Latino population's participation in clinical trials that could result in life-saving treatments. By maintaining a strong clinical footprint on the island, we also foster that the Latino population benefits from advances in public health and medicine, including personalized medicine.

Although the overall Puerto Rican pharma market is smaller than other US states, Merck is one of the few global companies that maintain a strong commercial presence locally. What makes Puerto Rico so strategically important that Merck chooses to have on-site commercial operations instead of managing them remotely?

The reason why we are strongly committed to maintaining and developing commercial operations here is to better serve the Puerto Rican patient population which presents important unmet medical needs. Merck invests significant resources in developing innovative treatments for the leading causes of deaths in Puerto Rico including cancer, diabetes and HIV. It is imperative for us to be here to ensure that Puerto Rican patients have access to these innovations. We are constantly looking for opportunities to improve and save lives here.

According to the Health Department, with more than 450,000 diagnosed patients, diabetes is the 3rd cause of death on the island. How are you working with healthcare to make sure your solutions provide the best value for people living with diabetes?

According to the latest figures, 15.7% of Puerto Ricans are living with diabetes, among the highest prevalence in the world. As a result, diabetes represents a significant burden to the local healthcare system and population. We collaborate closely with different stakeholders to help improve diabetes care on the island, from prevention to diagnosis and treatment. Part of our work consists in ensuring that the value of the solutions we provide is recognized by the stakeholders that are responsible for enabling access to medicines, primarily the government and health insurance providers in both the public and private segments.

However, access is only one part of the equation. Our medical team works closely with the medical community in providing continuing medical education to ensure that healthcare professionals have the most up-to-date information and that protocols and guidelines are implemented properly so that patients can receive the best care.

Last but not least, we support efforts by patient associations like the Puerto Rico Diabetes Association and physician groups such as the Puerto Rican Society of Endocrinology and Diabetology (Sociedad Puertorriqueña de Endocrinología y Diabetología) in their efforts to educate and prevent diabetes by promoting healthy habits, raising awareness and increasing diagnosis through community-based detection clinics.

Merck has partnered with AT&T, Direct Relief and Softbox on a program testing the potential of drones to deliver temperature-dependent medicines and vaccines to hard-to-reach locations. The 4th successful mission was conducted in the Bahamas this month, with former test flights taking place in Puerto Rico and Switzerland. Could you tell us more about the potential of this technology to relieve disaster-stricken areas?

We are extremely enthusiastic about this pilot. During Hurricane Maria, we saw first-hand how people most at risk in disasters live in communities that are likely to be cut off from essential healthcare access due to the disruption of transportation and communications. Regrettably, many lives were lost because those vulnerable communities were unable to access services and life-saving medicines during the emergency and initial response period.

After the devastating event, Merck decided to test drone technology in Puerto Rico to deliver lifesaving products in hard-to-reach communities in the face of a disaster. The different partners you mentioned came to the island and several test flights were conducted. The drones were equipped with cold-chain delivery technology allowing for precise control of temperatures and utilized real-time, continuous temperature tracking designed to ensure safe and effective delivery. The flights were successful: the drones reached their destination while preserving the integrity of the medicines. However, there are regulatory challenges that still need to be addressed. Together with our partners and regulatory agencies working to address these hurdles. In any case, this pilot represents a significant step forward in biopharmaceutical supply chain innovation and for humanitarian efforts around the world. If this technology helps to save even one life, it would have been worth it.

On a more personal note, you have spent your entire career at Merck, starting as a sales rep and moving to positions of increasing responsibility in marketing and sales management. What makes you so dedicated to this company?

What could be better than waking up and knowing that you can make a difference in the lives of people, not only patients but also our employees? Working in a company where people identify with the mission of the company is really powerful. Regardless of the day-to-day routine, we always take the time to remember that we work for a greater purpose, impacting the lives of patients who may be family members, friends or neighbours.

Both Merck's commercial and manufacturing operations in Puerto Rico are currently led by women, and you are the first woman in your position. What would be your advice to future female leaders?

Firstly, it is curial to own your professional development. It is not the responsibility of your manager to help you grow professionally. Moreover, you cannot wait for the right circumstances to appear, you create your own circumstances. Secondly, communicate what your aspirations and dreams are to others around you. If no one knows what your goals are, no one will be able to help you along the way. Last but not least, you should get a coach, a mentor and a sponsor. Each role is different and has a tremendous impact in your development. A coach is someone who will help you define the path forward and give you the tools necessary to move forward. A mentor is someone who is already where you want to be and will share his expertise and give you advice. Finally, a sponsor will let others know about you, and position you with people looking for a profile like yours.

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