

Interview with Gloria Stella, Gonzalez Perez, President, Advance Scientific Group, Colombia

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You have been working for Advance Scientific since 2007, having previously worked with local companies in a similar industry. What were your main objectives when you started at Advance Scientific, and how have the last seven years lived up to your expectations?

When I started in 2007, the pharmaceutical industry was mainly brand-oriented and was largely controlled by multinational corporations, especially for costly diseases. Today, the needs of consumers have been satisfied by products from countries such as India, China, and Korea. Therefore, accessibility for Colombians has increased and prices have decreased. Before 2007, the market was really profitable for big companies, but considering the recent growth of the industry along with the entry of many new actors, there has been a positive impact on costs. Now that the industry is more active, one must keep in mind that this is not about brand competition but rather a competition of quality and innovation.

What have been some of the primary achievements that you have personally achieved in the last two to three years?

Advance Scientific has been actively participating in the prevention of tuberculosis. The company has been fighting for INVIMA's authorization since its inception. The Institute gave Advance Scientific sanitary registration for tuberculosis tests that had not existed in the country before. It has been a long process that just finished at the end of 2012. Previously, the World Health Organization was directly bringing such tests but in very few quantities, and it was very costly to import them. Nowadays, people in every region of Colombia under both the contributory and subsidized systems have access to those tests at a low cost. This was one of the company's first successes.

Secondly, public hospitals now have access to innovative drugs in intensive care; such is the example of Dexmedetomidine, which we brought from India with a substantial difference of price than the one product that was available before through Hospira. Last year, this drug was costing USD 100 and now has a set price of USD 30. Individuals in Colombia can actually afford to buy these kinds of drugs now.

Thirdly, Advance Scientific has provided an opportunity for talented people to join the company. Advance Scientific started off as a very small company, and thus it was not perceived as being attractive for talented people of the pharmaceutical industry. Now I am proud to see that people are fighting for job applications! Advance Scientific has 15 professionals from companies like Janssen and AstraZeneca. Most of these individuals are over the age of 45, at which point MNCs tend not to newly hire. In this company, the directors are very experienced.

Advance Scientific's fourth success is to have entered the Peruvian market in 2010, though the request for authorization was made in 2008. We created a subsidiary which has been very well received by the hospitalary sector, though the market there was focused on many Indian drugs and branded products were not that strong. We have registered three products for the time being. This success is due to the fact that laboratories in Europe are now considering Latin American countries for drug production, which was not a trend before the European financial crisis.

What would you say will be the impact of the upcoming health reforms as proposed by Minister Gaviria in the next few months?

The fact that the Health Promoters of Health will disappear is something positive, as this will create more equity. I think the impact will be very constructive, since many companies used to keep money before giving it to the hospitals. Some hospitals have had a financial collapse. I think that having a decentralization of the health system will really benefit the population and the industry as well. I am sure that hospitals will end up in a better financial state, and will be able to reimburse their suppliers.

What do you find to be the key characteristics of the Colombian market? Do you find any strategic advantages being here, in a gateway position between Central and South America?

To be in Colombia is an advantage because it is an entry door for Central America. If I am in Asia, or in Europe, Colombia is very strategic in terms of logistics. Similarly, for investors, the fact that Colombia has harbors in two different oceans is an advantage for importing raw materials or technology. Moreover, Bogota has many advantages: its infrastructure, we have talented people, with good training programs for the pharmaceutical industry. Compared to Panama, Colombia is far more replete with talented individuals!

Advance Scientific sells a number of products ranging from neonatology, cardiovascular, anesthesia, and antibiotics. What do you expect to be the main growth drivers for 2013?

Advance Scientific's priority is public health; we realize that this market is still to be supplied. According to research, eight people out of 100,000 individuals have tuberculosis, but in reality, it is much more because of sub-diagnoses of the disease. This represents an interesting opportunity for the company. Advance Scientific will be working with laboratories from Germany in the near future. Thankfully, the costs of tuberculosis treatment at this step are fairly affordable.

Advance Scientific has a number of collaborations with local hospital foundations. What opportunities have these partnerships brought?

Local foundations really benefit from having new innovative molecules at a reasonable price. Foundations like Fundación Santa Fe Bogota or Valle de Lili really appreciate new market clinical studies because they want fewer infections in their hospitals. These foundations are really enthusiastic about participating in clinical trials. Advance Scientific can directly prove the efficiency of its products while justifying their affordable prices. Every year, Advance Scientific financially supports these foundations' annual events, because they are the future of health in this country.

Advance Scientific's motto is "Innovando para salvar vidas". What would be an example in which the innovation of Advance Scientific's products saving lives?

Advance Scientific sells a drug called Vasopressin. Over an Easter weekend, a patient's life was endangered due to some serious health complications, and Advance Scientific delivered the drug regardless of the holiday. The company's priority was to deliver medicine to the patient. We have a special sensibility for emergencies.

Similarly, Advance Scientific has been contacted over weekends for products for premature babies, which the company immediately provided to clinics in Colombia. This has saved the lives of many prematurely born infants.

What can we expect from Advance Scientific if we were to return in Colombia in the next three to four years?

Within 5 years, I hope that Advance Scientific will have expanded into other Latin American countries besides Peru. Costa Rica, for example, is a potential market. The company is currently working on a logistics center in the industrial zone of Bogota. For the time being, Advance Scientific has distribution centers in Cali. Advance Scientific will have national coverage in the coming years, especially on the Atlantic coast. We will also develop in the public area, not just hospitals.

Advance Scientific will expand its portfolio in Dermatology delivering highly complex therapies for diseases such as Pemphigus Vulgaris and Psoriasis. Additionally, the company is always looking for new nice supplying partners.

In terms of public health, I want Advance Scientific to focus on medicines to address Public Health Diseases, and as one of the projects is the care of patients with multidrug resistant Tuberculosis, we want to develop Prevention and Care campaigns on the Colombian Pacific Coast, a highly vulnerable region where the most number of patients diagnosed with this disease were found.

Personally, the distribution center is the priority. The logistics have to guarantee fast supply, in good conditions, with good practices.

What would be your final message to our international readers?

In the pharmaceutical market, we have to think more in terms of people rather than profits. This is a sensitive market. Health is above everything. Using this principle, the world would be a better place.

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