Myrta Atiles â?? Head of the PDA Puerto Rico Chapter, Puerto Rico

> Weâ??re not just reconnecting with our rootsâ??weâ??re planting new ones. The PDA Puerto Rico chapter is a bridge between our islandâ??s rich pharmaceutical legacy and a future powered by innovation, collaboration, and purpose.

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The Parenteral Drug Association (PDA) is a non-profit global organisation established in 1946, providing support to the pharmaceutical industry with valuable information on science, technology, and regulatory matters. Myrta Atiles, head of the newly revived PDA Puerto Rico chapter, discusses the islandâ??s world-class manufacturing expertise and the importance of showcasing Puerto Ricoâ??s talent on a global stage. Atiles highlights the chapterâ??s goals of enhancing industry collaboration, promoting education, and leveraging emerging technologies like AI. She emphasises the value of partnerships with local associations and academia to strengthen talent development and ensure Puerto Rico remains a competitive hub for the pharmaceutical industry. Her motivation for leading the chapter is rooted in her commitment to her country and the industry, believing that Puerto Rico has much to offer globally.

Could you please introduce the Parenteral Drug Association and the Puerto Rican chapter? What is the organisationâ??s overall mission?

The Parenteral Drug Association, or PDA, is a non-profit global organisation established in 1946. It is a leading provider of support to the pharmaceutical industry, offering valuable information on science, technology, and regulatory matters.

The organisationâ??s overarching goal is to improve patient care, with a focus on maximising product quality, availability, and value. We achieve this by connecting people, science, and regulation within the industry. Our mission is to advance pharmaceutical manufacturing science and regulation, so that we can ultimately serve patients more effectively.

PDA is a global organisation, headquartered in the US, with chapters in various countries and regions. These chapters allow local communities to engage and collaborate more closely. For example, here in Puerto Rico, we currently have about 80 members. Our goal is to increase that number to at least 100 members.

Historically, we had a very active chapter here in Puerto Rico. However, like many organisations, we experienced a period of stagnation during the pandemic, as many leaders had to adjust to new circumstances. As a result, the chapter was temporarily deactivated.

Since last year, a group of professionals began working together to reactivate the chapter, recognising the wealth of expertise in pharmaceutical manufacturing here in Puerto Rico. Today, we have 14 members managing chapter activities; four on the board of directors and another 10 across four key committeesâ??the financial committee, the marketing and communications committee, the activities committee, and the external outreach committee, which focuses on student chapters and other external collaborations.

How would you describe the profile of PDAâ??s members?

Most of our members are not CEOs, but professionals who are directly involved in the manufacturing process. For example, we have a lot of quality professionals who are heavily involved with regulatory compliance. Additionally, we have process development and manufacturing professionals who are keen to stay up to date with emerging technologies and industry trends.

Our members are particularly focused on understanding new advancements in manufacturing technology, as well as ensuring that they are well-prepared to meet evolving regulatory expectations. They play a crucial role in ensuring that best practices and new regulations are integrated effectively into the processes within their facilities.

Given that you are in the early stages of establishing a presence in Puerto Rico, what are your current key priorities?

First, let me explain why having a chapter here in Puerto Rico is important for us. Puerto Rico is home to a world-class hub of expertise in manufacturing sciences. The island has a long-standing history of reliability and compliance in manufacturing operations, which is why it is crucial for us to ensure that Puerto Rico has a voice on the global stage.

PDA provides that global voice for Puerto Ricoâ??s expertise. We are able to engage with PDA Interest Groups and, where our members can contribute and influence future regulations and industry practices. This gives us an opportunity to directly participate in shaping the future of pharmaceutical manufacturing and regulation. So, it is about ensuring that Puerto Ricoâ??s contributions are recognised on a global level.

Secondly, it is essential that we continue investing in resources. The world of pharmaceuticals is constantly evolving, and we need to ensure that Puerto Rico stays at the forefront of these changes.

PDA, alongside the local chapter, serves as a vital knowledge provider for the industry, helping to educate and inform.

By having a local chapter, we can also facilitate local conferences tailored to Puerto Ricoâ??s unique needs. These conferences are not only more cost-effective, but they also allow us to reach a larger audience, helping to ensure that our workforce is well-informed about the latest developments and gaps in the industry. This is crucial for maintaining our competitive edge as a community.

In our approach, we focus on four key pillars. The first is people, where we aim to grow chapter membership and establish a student chapter to secure future talent and foster early industry connections. The second pillar is science, where we focus on educating members about manufacturing trends, emerging technologies, and integrating AI and compliance within the industry. The third is regulations, ensuring our staff stay informed about evolving regulatory requirements, including globalisation and new standards. Finally, leadership is crucial, as we seek to develop technical and strategic leadership skills while fostering partnerships with other stakeholders to strengthen the industry community.

Do you currently have any programs or partnerships to help develop and strengthen member skills within the sector?

We are just getting started with this, but we are already making significant strides. One of the first initiatives we launched was our conference on February 25th this year. At that event, we specifically invited members from academia to participate, and it was an excellent starting point for beginning those crucial conversations.

The feedback we received from academia was incredibly positive, with many expressing interest in further collaboration. For example, several of the attendees suggested that we create a forum where we can bring together the industry and academia to better understand each otherâ??s needs and work together on shared goals.

Additionally, one of the professors mentioned that they would like to establish a student chapter, with their students registering with PDA. This is just one example of the types of initiatives we are beginning to implement to encourage integration between academia and industry. We are committed to continuing these efforts, ensuring that both sectors are aligned and that students are prepared to take on leadership roles within the industry.

Artificial Intelligence has become a part of daily life across various industries. What do you see as both the opportunities and the potential threats of these important technologies for the pharmaceutical sector?

AI is increasingly becoming a reality for all industries, and the pharmaceutical sector is no exception. At the end of the day, we operate in a highly regulated environment, so it is crucial that we understand how to integrate these rapidly evolving technologies into our day-to-day operations while maintaining compliance.

When we think about the pharmaceutical industry, we are looking at a wide range of areasâ??from supply chain management and inventory levels to production planning and investigations. The key is to identify where AI and other emerging technologies can be applied in each of these areas, and then understand the limitations and risks associated with their use.

It is essential to put the appropriate controls in place to ensure that compliance is not compromised. This is where collaboration with regulatory agencies becomes critical, to ensure that the integration of AI and similar technologies is done in a way that aligns with regulatory standards and expectations. By working closely with these agencies, we can make sure the technology is being used effectively and responsibly.

Could you elaborate on some of the key manufacturing trends shaping the segment today?

The manufacturing landscape in the pharmaceutical sector is evolving rapidly, largely due to the new modalities and types of molecules that are emerging as medicines. For example, we still have the well-known monoclonal antibodies, but we are also seeing the rise of more advanced treatments, such as cell and gene therapies. These therapies require a different set of technologies and expertise to develop and manufacture, which brings a new level of complexity to the production process.

Another emerging trend, particularly in the oncology space, is the development of antibody-drug conjugates (ADCs). These use highly potent, cytotoxic compounds, and it is crucial to develop specific strategies for handling these substances safely, both for patients and for the workers involved in manufacturing. The technology and equipment used in the manufacturing process need to be carefully aligned with these new modalities to ensure that these powerful biologics are produced safely and effectively.

Additionally, there is a major focus on protecting the environment in which these drugs are manufactured. Many of the products we focus on, such as injectables, bypass the bodyâ??s natural protective barriers once administered, which means that contamination during the manufacturing process must be strictly controlled.

To mitigate this risk, companies are adopting advanced technologies such as automation and isolators to safeguard the product. These technologies not only enhance safety but also improve the efficiency and productivity of the manufacturing process, which is vital as the industry continues to innovate.

Looking ahead, what are your goals for this chapter of the PDA over the next three years?

For us, success over the next few years will be measured in a few key ways. First, we aim to significantly increase the number of members. It is essential that we demonstrate the value of being part of this chapter so that more professionals in the industry see the benefits of joining. One of our goals is to have a strong representation from Puerto Rico in global reviews. This would mean having a quantifiable number of our members contributing to the publications and discussions generated by PDA, which would solidify our presence and expertise in shaping the future of the industry.

Another key objective is to foster successful collaborations and alliances with other stakeholders in Puerto Rico. While we are a small island, we have a high concentration of pharmaceutical industry professionals, and I believe there is a real opportunity to leverage that. We have already started building communications with other associations, and I see success in creating a collaborative environment where we are not competing but complementing each other to serve the unique needs of the industry.

Lastly, I want our conferences to continue making a significant impact. It is crucial that we keep our members up to date with the latest trends and developments. Our events should not only reflect what is happening today but also give us a glimpse into the future, helping to ensure our workforce is always prepared for what is to come.

How would you characterise the response from both the industry and other associations regarding PDAâ??s ambitions on the island? How did the local ecosystem react to the introduction of the Puerto Rican chapter?

I have to say, I have been both extremely happy and pleasantly surprised by the feedback we have received from the industry and from other associations. There is a genuine willingness to collaborate. Everyone is eager to work together, to understand what each of us is bringing to the table, so we donâ??t end up competing but rather complementing each other. There is a strong desire to collaborate and identify opportunities for maximising our yearly schedule of events.

We also saw tremendous interest in sponsorship. We werenâ??t sure what to expect at first, but we had no issues securing sponsors, which speaks volumes about the trust and belief they have in our mission and the value we bring to the industry.

The success of our first conference was another big highlight. We werenâ??t sure how it would go, but we ended up with over 130 participants. The event was very focused, with rich discussions, and we received fantastic feedback. Attendees described it as â??the best conference I have attended,â?• citing the relevance of the topics and the calibre of the speakers. This positive response reassures me that we are moving in the right direction, and with the support from all sectors of the industry in Puerto Rico, we can make a high-impact contribution to the island.

When speaking with your fellow PDA chapters around the global stage, how familiar are they with Puerto Ricoâ??s healthcare landscape?

When I look at the industries we have here and the manufacturing plants we operate, we are world-class. We have no reason to hide or downplay our achievements. The performance and the deliveries we produce here are on par with the best globally. Puerto Rico has the expertise, but the message is not as widely recognised as it should be.

What we need to focus on now is reinforcing this message, ensuring it gets the global recognition it deserves. Our commitment to serving patients is unwavering, and that commitment extends to ensuring the highest quality in the products we manufacture. Puerto Ricans understand the relevance of delivering these products to patients. If we can showcase that to the worldâ??that Puerto Rico is a hub for top-quality products produced by a committed workforceâ??it will undoubtedly serve both the industry and the patients, we aim to help.

Having a demanding career already, how did you come to be involved with the PDA?

At the end of the day, I am Puerto Rican, and I have been part of the industry for quite a while. I know the calibre of the talent here, and I wondered if there was a way I could contribute to Puerto Ricoâ??s future and advancement, leveraging my own knowledge and experience.

This is all volunteer work, so it takes up a significant amount of my personal time. But I absolutely love it because I truly believe in what we are building. What we are doing here has immense value. It is not just about showcasing talent, but also about ensuring that talent is nurtured and remains in Puerto Rico for the long term. What got us to this point wonâ??t necessarily take us to the next level, so we need to continue investing in and promoting the future workforce. That is my motivationâ??bringing something meaningful back to my country and using my expertise to help foster that growth.

What would be your final message for our global readers about the PDA and Puerto Rico?

The Parenteral Drug Association in Puerto Rico is here to stay. We have significant contributions to make, both globally and locally. Puerto Rico is home to a wealth of knowledge and capability, and we intend to use this as a springboard to showcase our talent and continue nurturing it for the future. We have made a strong start, and we are committed to making a lasting impact in the industry.

Overall, I am just happy to see that Puerto Rico is being recognised for its capabilities in the industry. There is a lot of great talent on the island, and it is exciting to see that being showcased more and more.

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