

Podcast with Dr. Juan Camilo Arjona Ferreira, Chief Medical Officer and head of global R&D&I at Organon

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Transcription.

Intro

Health with Perspective, a podcast about women's health, with Marta Fernández.



Marta Fernández

Despite the fact that women make up half of the population, scientific research continues to reveal differences that often begin in clinical trials, especially in cardiovascular diseases, mental health and cancer.

Furthermore, only 4% of research in the health field is dedicated to specific pathologies of women.

Taking into account equal and proportional measures in the development of clinical trials, disaggregating their results based on sex or not limiting themselves to applying to men and women the results obtained based mainly on male ideology, are essential measures to improve health comprehensive of women.

What other things can pharmaceutical companies do to advance health with perspective? To better understand the role of innovation, research and technological advances in the healthcare field, today the top medical and R&D&I manager of Organon worldwide, Dr. Juan Camilo Arjona Ferreira, came to Salud con Perspectiva. Pablo Maderuelo tells us about his professional career.

Pablo Maderuelo:

Juan Camilo Arjona Ferreira is Chief Medical Officer and responsible for R&D&I worldwide at Organon, a company focused on improving the comprehensive health of women, as well as doctor specialized in Gynecology and Obstetrics from the Universidad del Rosario in Colombia. Dr. Arjona Ferreira is responsible for directing the advancement of the Company's portfolio of medicines and devices, providing strategic knowledge and overseeing the scientific, medical and regulatory capabilities of the organization.

He has more than 20 years of experience in clinical research and development: before joining Organon he held different positions as medical director, R&D&I director, or executive director of clinical research in other pharmaceutical companies. In addition, having worked as a gynecologist in the beginning, he has a very close vision of the health needs of women.

Marta Fernández

Doctor Juan Camilo Arjona Ferreira, welcome to health with perspective.

Dr. Arjona

Hello Marta, thank you very much, it's a pleasure to be here with you today.

Marta Fernández

Juan Camilo, as a doctor and expert in R&D&I, there is little research into women's pathologies, what do you think is the cause?

Dr. Arjona

I believe that the cause is a fairly prevalent problem in our society, which is gender bias. It is an ancient problem that we have not yet managed to completely solve, and that gender bias is in all of us.

In fact, a United Nations report last year told us that 9 out of 10 people, men or women, in the world have a negative bias towards women in multiple areas of life.

So, if you think this, the decisions we have made about health in general have been biased against women, we have done less research, we invest less in research on conditions that only affect women... For example, until 1993, in the United States it was prohibited for women to participate in clinical studies, if you put all this together, then you begin to understand why we know so little about women's health, why we have used men's health parameters to extrapolate them to women, knowing that there are significant differences, and we have never explored those differences.

So what we have today is less knowledge, less solutions that are unique for women and the solutions we have are not suitable in their use for women, different from men

Marta Fernández

How can you work from the R&D&I Department of a pharmaceutical company to improve this situation? What specific women's health needs are you focusing on?

Dr. Arjona

Our vision is quite broad regarding the health of women. Historically, probably for the same reason we just discussed, women's health has been defined as limited to reproductive health. So we talk only about contraception, we talk about pregnancy, we talk about menopause... but always limited to this reproductive space.

We see women's health as a continuum from birth to the end of life, and what we can do so that, for the majority of this time, girls and women are healthy, so that they can live their life to the fullest. So, in this vision we talk about, obviously, maintaining that focus on reproductive health, which is important; but we also add conditions that are unique to women such as endometriosis and polycystic ovary syndrome, which are very prevalent and for which we do not have adequate solutions. And we also include situations, conditions, diseases that disproportionately affect women, such as rheumatic diseases, migraine and many others. And very importantly, something that is quite ignored is the conditions and diseases that affect women differently.

And one of those that I think is most important is cardiovascular disease. Also mental illness, but cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death in women, however, treatment today is not appropriate for women per se; diagnosis is delayed for up to two weeks compared to men; the symptoms are ignored, many women are sent home when they are having a heart attack, and what we know is that women die more frequently from a heart attack than men.

So we see, we have this broader vision and from our perspective we seek, in general, more knowledge, that is the way we can influence, generate more knowledge, develop new products and solutions for these conditions and talk about it, because generating awareness and education in this regard is a way to contribute to advancing in this aspect as well.

Marta Fernández

At the beginning we talked about the differences between men and women in participation in clinical trials. And I would like to pull that thread: Juan Camilo, according to your experience, what is the reason for this difference and how can it be reversed?

Dr. Arjona

It is very important to change what we are talking about, for women to participate more in clinical studies. As I told you before, a while ago it was prohibited, there was no option. Now, in fact, it is not only recommended, but it is required that women participate, but that does not necessarily mean that we achieve equitable participation, so this requires that companies like us make the effort to go where the women are, to establish designs of our studies that allow women to participate more easily and, very importantly, include women's voices in the design of the studies. Talk to the people, [with] the women that we want to participate and understand what is going to make the study easier, the results more significant and we can get the most out of the results of our studies.

Marta Fernández

In an article that you have published in the media "Clinical Leader", you affirm that integrating women's voices in the design of trials can be key to developing more effective and patient-centered research.

And here you point out two points, I think, that are very important: the need for more women in scientific development and also to give a voice to patients.

Dr. Arjona

Agreed. I believe that this perspective of women in everything we do to advance women's health is very important, and as you say, there are those two perspectives, having more women involved in the research process, in the design of the studies, and talk to patients, people, women we want to help and understand their life experience with the disease or condition we are treating.

Also understand what is going to make it easier to participate in the study, yes, how easy it is to stop going to work to be able to come to the study, and now we have a number of options to bring the studies to patients, using the technology that we have today, all these electronic devices that we have at hand, very generally, and in this way facilitate the participation of women in clinical studies.

Marta Fernández

We know that many situations specific to women such as menstruation, pregnancy, breastfeeding or menopause are key when talking about women's comprehensive health, but Juan Camilo, do we know enough about how these conditions affect common diseases when women suffer from them? How can we improve this knowledge?

Dr. Arjona

I think we know, that's what we know more about as part of the... but we don't know enough. We can always understand better, not so much the physiology or how it normally works, why it happens we understand, but it is the alterations of those normal processes, which we do not understand well enough, and that is where we start to get into trouble and not being able to help in the right way.

So, more research, again listening to the woman, because understanding those differences between when it is normal and when it is abnormal is not so clear and is very independent from one woman to another.

In fact, with respect to, for example, menstruation, which you mentioned, what is abnormal bleeding and what is normal? There used to be a definition that said a certain amount of bleeding, but no one measures how much you bleed. Now the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics defines abnormal bleeding as "bleeding that affects a woman's daily life," as it will be very different from one woman to another, so that perspective of the individual, of the person, it is very important so that we can really solve this problem and that is why it is important to listen to women.

Marta Fernández

Tell us what innovative projects you are working on at the moment.

Dr. Arjona

Right now we are working on several things, which for me are very exciting. One is a product for the treatment of endometriosis. Endometriosis is a very common disease, it occurs in one in 10 women of reproductive age, and it causes pain, sometimes chronic pain, it causes infertility, 50% of women who go to fertility treatments have endometriosis, and it causes a lot of disruption from that of women's daily lives. So, there are not enough solutions and the project that we are working on would, if it works, obviously, it would be a significant advance in the treatment of this disease.

We are also working on a project for the treatment of polycystic ovary syndrome, which is also very common, it happens to between 10 and 25% of women, it also affects fertility, but it also affects metabolism and cardiovascular health, that is, it has very significant impacts and there is no approved treatment for it.

So these two are areas that are very important and where we believe we can make a significant contribution.

We also continue working on contraception, in a collaboration with another company. We are developing a non-hormonal contraceptive, which is a current need, most contraceptives are hormonal and there are women who either cannot use them or do not want to use them. So it is an area in which we are also working.

Marta Fernández

From the United States Government, an initiative has been launched to promote research on women's health. Organon's CEO has even met with President Biden and the Gender Policy Council to support those efforts. Can we say that we are at the beginning of a new era for the

health of women? How could it help to promote a look with perspective on health in other countries?

Dr. Arjona

I believe that we are at a very important turning point in female health. If we look around, things like what you just mentioned, for the White House to make a decision to, very proactively, talk about significant changes in how the Government approaches research and development in women's health is a radical change, historical. But we have seen it in other countries too: in France, the Government has made endometriosis a state priority. So yes, we are seeing a change in policy, a change in how we talk about women's health, the fact that we are having a conversation like this is novel, and it didn't happen as commonly before.

We have worked a lot, or a lot of people are working on changing, or ending the taboos that exist regarding conversations about women's health, so yes, I am very optimistic that we are seeing a significant change that is going to be very important.

Marta Fernández

Doctor Juan Camilo Arjona Ferreira, the truth is that it has been a real pleasure to have you with us and to be able to better understand how health can be promoted from the perspective of pharmaceutical companies.

Thank you for participating in the podcast Health with Perspective.

Dr. Arjona

Thank you very much, a pleasure.

Closing

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