

Embracing diversity – for the sake of true innovation

ANNELI HIDALGO ([HTTP://NORDICLIFESCIENCE.ORG/AUTHOR/ANNELI/](http://nordiclifescience.org/author/anneli/)) - JULY 1, 2017

🗨️ COMMENT ([HTTP://NORDICLIFESCIENCE.ORG/EMBRACING-DIVERSITY-SAKE-TRUE-INNOVATION/#RESPOND](http://nordiclifescience.org/embracing-diversity-sake-true-innovation/#respond))



Bahija Jallal’s curiosity and passion for science have been strong driving forces throughout her entire career, as has her belief in the need for diversity to truly bring forth innovation. A view that is also deeply incorporated in her job as Head of MedImmune.

Founded in 1988, the MedImmune built its reputation on Synagis, used to prevent respiratory syncytial virus and the first monoclonal antibody approved by the FDA for the prevention of an infectious disease. MedImmune is also behind the nasal-spray flu vaccine FluMist and has contributed to drug products such as Humira and Gardasil. Ten years ago MedImmune was acquired by AstraZeneca in a USD 15.6 billion deal, making MedImmune the pharma giant’s global biologics research and development arm. After ten years it accounts for half of the AstraZeneca pipeline and has more than 130 biologics in R&D and 40 products in clinical development. Bahija Jallal, who is responsible for the company’s biologics research, development and clinical activities, says that the secret behind the company’s success has been twofold.

“One strength lies in our work in science and immunology, while the other revolves around the antibody technology. Under that umbrella MedImmune has taken the advantage to move quickly into other areas. We also have a strong entrepreneurial spirit and a culture of determination.”

The plan is to continue on that path of innovation, says Bahija Jallal. The company has some promising products underway in the pipeline.

“Benralizumab for example is a compound which the FDA has accepted for review in severe, uncontrolled asthma. Anifrolumab could be of great value for lupus patients that really don’t have many treatment alternatives right now. But it’s not only about bringing medicines to the patients but also about being innovative and pushing the boundaries of science. That includes embracing research beyond monoclonal antibodies to genetic engineering, nanotechnology and disruptive technologies to what healthcare will look like twenty years from now.”

Breaking new ground

Bahija Jallal's career in biotech started with her discovery of the world of science. She grew up in Casablanca, Morocco, at a time when Moroccan women and girls had a traditionally traced-out future that was restricted to marriage. Bahija and her sisters broke new ground as they became the first women in the family to go to college. She had a determination to pursue her dream and study science. Her wish was also fulfilled to a great extent through the important support she received from her mother.

“She allowed me to satisfy my curiosity but also to push forward and not limit myself to what society thought was right for a woman. I was really lucky to have a mother that pushed us all to go as far as we could, and that has pushed the determination in me for my entire life.”

Her interest in science, which started at a young age, came from a desire to seek answers.

“I loved science from the very beginning. I love that in science, nothing is taken for granted. You can always ask why and continue to learn. That is what always fascinated me. Later on I also wanted to know more about the human body, how it functions and how we can help when the body doesn't function. This is an area that I feel very passionate about. So it is a dream come true for me to work in a field where the science has real, tangible potential to help people. I feel very privileged.”

The importance of asking why was also initiated by a family tragedy. When Bahija was nine years old her father passed away due to a medical error. From there she really started to ask why and learn more about science and ultimately wanted to help others.

A perfect match at MedImmune

Her passion for science brought her to France. She left Morocco for Paris to study biology and physiology at the university, followed by postdoctoral research at the Max-Planck Institute of Biochemistry in Martinsried, a suburb of Munich. She then headed for the United States and California where she began working at Sugen, a subsidiary of Pfizer. Bahija was part of the company whose work led to a regulatory approval of a receptor protein-tyrosine kinase inhibitor for the treatment of gastrointestinal stromal tumor, advanced renal cell cancer and advanced pancreatic neuroendocrine tumor. Then followed a position at Chiron Corporation where she served as Vice President, Drug Assessment and Development. MedImmune reached out to see if Bahija would be interested in working for the Maryland biotech and in 2006 she joined the company as Vice President Translational Science. Seven years later she was appointed head of the company.

After a decade at the firm she has kept her appreciation for MedImmune's business philosophy.

“What brought me here is also what has kept me here. There is a strong entrepreneurial and innovative culture at MedImmune that definitely goes along with my own values. When I learned about the history of the company I saw that it had the first and only prophylaxis for the treatment of RSV. This sent a message to me that MedImmune was an innovative company. We have a learning culture, which I love, because I constantly seek knowledge. Before I joined, I was very much focused on oncology, but the multi-therapeutic approach at MedImmune appealed to me. I'm also very proud of how diverse the company is, which makes us richer and stronger.”

Focus on learning and innovation

Bahija Jallal's many years in various management positions, not least the past four years as Head of MedImmune, have given her insights into what constitutes a successful leadership. Ambition and drive are two important components, but perhaps the most significant ingredient is encouraging a culture of learning.

“You have to have an entrepreneurial spirit. Drug development is not for the fainthearted. It is very hard work. For me, a good leader is someone who can set a bold vision for the organization and at the same time chart the course for that and motivate employees. Also, innovation is often about stumbling along the way, making some mistakes, but picking yourself up and moving forward. I think it is important to have a culture of learning where people are willing to be challenged and take risks, continuously learn and have the passion for the development of medicines for the sake of the patients.”

Another aspect that Bahija believes is characteristic for her leadership style is encouraging collaboration and providing an environment where teamwork and innovation can take place.

“One thing we have done at MedImmune is to bring down the wall, to create an open space and a workplace where everyone works together. It is also important for us to focus on external collaborations with other companies and academia. Our science should encourage scientists to do what they do best. Because only great science can bring great medicines.”

Enjoying the daily work

The job as Head of MedImmune allows Bahija Jallal to pursue her love for science and innovation and more importantly, a chance to save lives with MedImmune's science, she says.

“That feeling cannot be described. It is an exhilarating sensation, yet humbling. I am in the most noble profession of helping patients and doing so with a sense of urgency. For me, this is not a job but more of a passion and I love coming to work every single day.”

The hardest part about the job however is the knowledge about the afflictions caused by many diseases – and the need for action.

“The pressure of really knowing that people are suffering is something that I find to be challenging, and also moving. To know that we can make a difference in a situation where every minute counts. We don’t have time to waste in developing treatments that can improve people’s lives and health. Bringing value to the shareholders is of course another pressure. But you learn along the way and eventually gain the experience to balance that pressure by being entrepreneurial and looking at how your pipeline can deliver, and that makes it all worth it.”

Staying focused amidst the tempest

The US has seen some political and media storms during the past months, revolving around executive orders from the Trump administration, such as the much talked-about immigration ban and the president’s slashing of funding for biomedical and science research. Decisions that could have a deep impact on US life sciences. Bahija Jallal does not elaborate her thoughts on what these effects could include, however she highlights the importance of keeping the focus on patient health.

“Changes will always happen. We have to remain focused on the core values. I believe that it is important to include diversity that opens up the door to innovation. I have lived in multiple countries throughout my career and have seen the value of that. For me, the United States has also always been a country that embraced diversity and innovation, which is one of the reasons why I have stayed here. But I think overall that we need to look at the long-term focus of patient health and we can’t lose that priority.”

Woman of the Year

Earlier this year Bahija Jallal was named 2017 Woman of the Year by the Healthcare Businesswomen’s Association, HBA. HBA is a global nonprofit organization dedicated to furthering the advancement and impact of women in the business of healthcare. The annual HBA Woman of the Year award was partly initiated to serve as a role model for other women to aspire to, a purpose that Bahija Jallal supports.

“I definitely think it’s important for women in life science to have role models. I have always had mentors and tried to pay that forward by being mentors for others, both men and women. What I have consistently told them is something that I was taught at an early age: always follow your passion. It is especially important to have that drive when working with drug development, a job that is not for the faint of heart.”

The award also serves for companies to consider how they are supporting the advancement of women within their own organization. A quick reality check reveals some discouraging statistics in the biotech sector. Sixty-five percent of biotech companies have no women in their board of directors and twenty percent have no women in leadership positions at all, even though many studies have shown that having a more diverse board of directors is good for business. Diverse boards often better mirror client and customer bases, for example, something particularly true in healthcare, a sector with a very diverse customer base.

A way to change the gender imbalance is to put these striking statistics on the agenda, believes Bahija Jallal.

“I think that the key is to raise awareness and get it out there. The best way to do that is to have data. Generally the statistics don’t look so good for the life science and biotech sector and are even more dire among pharma companies. This is an industry for which innovation is at the heart of what we do, and I believe that we can only succeed if we have diversity.”

That notion has become a truth for MedImmune. Fifty percent of employees are female and the leadership team is equally diverse. The drive behind this again stems from the strong belief that innovation comes from diversity.

“At MedImmune we believe that diversity at all levels drives innovation. It is part of the foundation of our culture and values. By having that principle the focus lies more on a person’s innovative and professional qualities rather than their gender or religion, and that assumption will in the end drive both equality and innovation.”

One way of taking measures to increase the gender diversity is by adopting quotas, a controversial instrument that at times could be necessary, says Bahija.

“*Sometimes, when the change is not going fast enough within certain areas or countries, I think it makes sense to move the needle to reach that ideal stage. I absolutely believe that we have to go back to the drawing board. Our industry is all about innovation and we need to start linking that to the power of diversity.*”

Bahija Jallal was honored at the HBA's 28th annual Woman of the Year (WOTY) event on Thursday, 11 May, at the New York Hilton Midtown.



Facts

Bahija Jallal

Born: in Morocco.

Family: Husband and two daughters.

Position: Executive Vice President AstraZeneca and Head of MedImmune.

Education: Master's degree in biology, Université de Paris VII, Paris, France; doctorate in physiology, University of Pierre & Marie Curie, Paris, France; postdoctoral research, Max-Planck Institute of Biochemistry, Martinsried, Germany.

Career: Worked at Sugen and Chiron before joining MedImmune as Vice-President, Translational Sciences in 2006, became Head of MedImmune in 2013.

Other engagements: A member of the American Association for Cancer Research, the American Association of the Advancement of Science. President of the board of directors of the Association of Women in Science. Serves on the board of trustees of the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland.

Interests: Reading, cooking, running and spending time with family.

Role model: Eleanor Roosevelt.

Favorite quote: "Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower." – *Steve Jobs*.

