

Square Roots, Summer 2004

Interview Questions for Dr Álvaro Espina Márquez

- Where were you born and when did you come to live in the UK? What were the reasons for the move?
- I was born in Seville, Spain in 1971, went to a public school in the UK in 83, where I took my O and A levels. The reasons for this move were my parent's interest in a good education and they liked the English model, although they remained in Spain. After my O levels I had the option to return back but I felt comfortable and identified myself with many aspects of British culture. I took my A levels in the UK and their Spanish equivalent the same summer, I could have returned to a Spanish University but I preferred SOP.
- Why did you choose to study at The School of Pharmacy?
- There were only three options among the elite, and the other London one was not among these, sorry Kings!! SOP won I preferred a city based campus rather than one up in a windy hill, or lost in the countryside. London is always London.
- What memories do you have of your time in London?
- The best years of my life, how does that sound! Although I have things in life to experience yet, like marriage, kids, etc. But above all is that there was the seriousness of studying and the fun of friends, activities, and great companionship. Many afternoons on my way to ULU, I didn't make it, the British Museum was too tempting: the Roseta Stone, The Parthenon sculptures, etc, although other days student life won over my interest to go to places like the Tate, I went after graduation, one day after. Going around London at night and enjoying the town with classmate/s was a romantic, exciting and a discovery adventure at that age. I must say that I lived the town and even though after graduation I worked outside London, I still lived in central London. Few of us realise how much London has, and the majority do not exploit a city, which the rest of the world envies. Later I went to NYC, went to Broadway musicals that I had seen in the West End. True they were richer but they were not better, the West End ones were closer, and with more style.
- Do you have memories of any particular staff members that you would like to share?
- It is very difficult to outstand one because so many contributed so much, Professor Fowler in my first year in the lab showed that drugs do affect organs in a observable way which brought to real an abstract and occult process, and later unravelled the marvel of DNA. Professor Willy Gibbons whose ability to make easily understandable the forefront of investigation at the time of a thoroughly complex and deep concept of anaesthetics and analgesics, with

is particular attitude and forms. an eminence whose knowledge was beyond me but approachable. Professor Moody who through the use of an electron microscope allowed me to culture viruses!! (bacteriophages) and see them, and even get a 3D model of them from these photos!! I will always treasure the kindness of the micro assistants in this pursuit. I had the pleasure of having professor Florence in my tribunal of my Thesis. He has not lost one ounce of the aura of majesty that he radiated from the first day. It was indeed great to have him, as a teacher in my third year, having the lessons in his office was something that marked me, It was an honour.

- Is there any event or time at the School of which you have a particular memory? Perhaps something amusing, or something that could be considered life-changing?
- Life changing was all the learning: the unravelling of DNA, pharmacology, and even pharmacognosy, even trying (never managing) to make those emulsions in pharmacy. To this date I have not seen a bacteria, although in microbiology they were suppose to be there, something grew on those plates but I still haven't seen one of those around. The faces of the examiners when in the middle of an exam I stopped and had my Twix and milk was worth seeing.
- On the social aspects, there were so many things: embarrassing, well the elections of first year rep, were I had to, before everyone in the lecture theatre, read certain type of magazine with certain item of dressware down to my ankles. The Welsh society, a group of students who were able in study but who realised that there was more to life. The spirit of all of us, the attitude. What can I say about the halls of residence parties.... and the freedom... but other aspects I will always remember, the RAG week, it was like taking a small holiday with friends and having fun with a charitable end. There is an anecdote, my parents came to visit from Spain, and we were walking up Oxford street and found my friends bedpushing, and I will always remember the smile of a friend's face, Luella Reynolds, as she presented the collecting jug to my mother. Obviously, I spent the entire day trying to explain to my parents why my friends were dressed in such a manner and doing such a thing. The friends made during your degree, are friends for life, and even though one might not see them in years they are always there.
- After graduating, you worked in a pharmacy in Spain. Did your degree from a British university rather than a Spanish university affect your job knowledge and performance?
- I was lucky because I finished in 92, the year of EU recognition of degrees, I was the first to ask this, and found myself working hand with hand with the authorities to establish the protocol. I found myself, a pharmacist at 21 where here is normally 24, but with learning, practical approach, more adequate, and more versatile and adaptable than my Spanish colleges placed me in a beneficial position. The difference in model of pharmacy and learning

process was an advantage although one needed to adapt to the reality of Spain. I was proud to be a SOP graduate and colleges looked with respect to a SOP graduate.

- You are currently a director of a pharmaceutical company in Spain. What does your role involve?
- I did not enter as a director; I entered as a regulatory affairs officer, moved to the production area, then went back to regulatory and then to the post I currently hold. The responsibility is not one of control, is more one of team building and environment generation of all the pharmaceutical aspects within the company. It can involve nearly anything from labour relations, to supervising R&D projects, arranging outsourcing policy, or even contract manufacture development, and putting ones prestige on the line when one gives an opinion at the board... External relationship with other companies are important, human relationships at this level are fundamental, one represents the company and tact is essential, never close a door on someone but avoid been run over. The person before you can be one day in a company with which business would be desirable, although he is now in a different situation.
- Also as the legal representative of the company before the health authorities one needs to know the political aims, limits, forms and job of the civil servant that handles a particular matter that is of your interest or holds essential information, always seeking a ground of understanding and respect, and achieving your goal. Involves knowledge of what happens within, what is perceived outwards, and what is happening outside.
- The job is one for a man for all seasons. It is received with prestige among colleagues. In a medium size company a Director has more freedom of movement and is closer to the processes. One must be ready and open to criticism, it is these aspects that make one feel valued and are indeed a great source of ideas, as well. As person responsible, been the able to protect your teammates when something goes wrong is required. One must never forget the trust that has been trusted by others, their livelihood; you are responsible to ensure that the company does better than the rest so that those with you feel safer, more confident and more motivated. The role fundamentally is team and confidence building so that the optimum level of performance is the aim, and be approachable when things do not all that well, with the information from the outside and ability to direct resources in pursue of company's goals and solutions.
- What do you particularly enjoy about your job and the profession in general?
- In my job the fact that within a routine, one deals within and outside the company, the post has that amount of variety that allows one to create and see interesting and challenging projects reach the market and cheer up the company as a whole.

- In the profession as a whole, that pharmacists are slowly but surely realising that there is no limit to the positions and roles they can hold in society. There are pharmacists more involved in patient welfare than patient care, this small aspect requires a new attitude, a new concept of pharmaceutical care, and I believe a new pharmacy. The illusion of the profession is beginning to act with arrogance against the old "leave things as they have always been" however, cohesion is a pending subject and not just at street level.
- You recently completed your part-time postgraduate degree whilst working. It must have been quite challenging to do both simultaneously?
- I started because I believe that if you study a science degree one has the moral obligation to contribute something to the advance of human kind on that field. That turned into a full blown Ph D. that demanded leaving work at 5 (normal hours 7am till 3pm) and working till 9pm evenings and weekends... the innovating aspect of the work and the illusion of bringing to life an initial moment of inspiration, together with developing of new tools to handle the information was the engine that allowed me to carry on and persist when quitting, because of overstretching, was considered. Like with most things in life, if one takes them as a hobby and does it thinking above all in the satisfying aspect, one can normally see it until the end. I had to refuse a job offer from another company, before I held the post I currently have because it would have meant stopping before it was finished, this could be thought as not been versatile, but at the end it turned out well, got my actual post two years later and finished two years after that. I believe that one should not take a step back not even to pick up speed, and refusing to the invested time would have meant not a job improvement but in reality a professional steep back.
- You are currently studying for a degree in law. Please tell us more about that.
- I am an inquisitive person, who seeks to understand the world around, and Law was always an aspect that interested me. It demands time to take lessons and study and after more than 10 years, it is hard. But learning is always enriching and one faces this second degree with a totally different attitude, one based on comprehension rather than absorption. It is above all fun, and that is the fundamental reason. I do not think I will ever practice as a Lawyer, but in my work it is always handy to know the limits off, and ways to do something. There is definitely a lack of pharmacist with both degrees and in some cases I have experienced that, before been able to tackle a matter I have spent a morning and a lunch explaining, to a lawyer, the playing field, objectives and threats in a particular matter before he could even proceed. I can guarantee that any pharmacist that decides to do law too will find a good, varied and interesting job.
- Here is a 5 year degree with a very different format to the UK and evaluation is constant and the fail rate is more than 20%, in some subjects it can reach

70%. The environment is different the number of students per year is four times that of SOP and most of them are from Seville. Exams are very differently assessed and rely on one teacher only. So far I am in my second year; I passed my first year without having to re-exam. In Spain, one can leave subjects behind, so that one could be taking subjects of first, second or third year if one had approved at least one of each of those years. When I finish it I will take a holiday and go to base camp of the Everest, as a reward.

- What would you consider to be your career highlights?
- I do not think that I have yet reached my peak, and professionally I can only move to a similar post in a larger company. True I have moved in various fields and changed Pharmacy in Spain forever bringing MDS and fitting it legally. I am a member of the think-tank of a national political party in health matters; I am currently the president of a debate forum on pharmaceutical aspects at a regional level. Nevertheless, my highlights are graduating in SOP and obtaining my Ph D.
- What are your plans for the future?
- Professionally I think that becoming an elected member of the Pharmaceutical Society in Spain and contribute to make pharmacy and pharmacist a more relevant, closer, and valued professional by society through a better practice, beginning the progressive move away from a professional that receives the money in hand from the patient to one where others, not the patient pays for the healthcare service it receives. And of course to finish my law degree.
- On the personal field, well, going to the first reunion of SOP graduates of 92 whenever that occurs. We missed a golden opportunity in 02. There is so many friends that I would love to see again, to all friends reading this, I am going to the UK in September, please make an opening on your agendas!!
- What advice would you give to pharmacy graduates just embarking on a career within the pharmaceutical industry?
- The industry, normally, allows you to fit in where you desire if you aim for it and prepare yourself for that post. Have at least two languages and be a person willing to be moved around. Big companies provide you with good pay but limited movements and interrelations, small or medium ones allow you more freedom, and you learn more about everything. Start in a small one, move around that little one and then move to a big one. Another way to get in is the indirect route, go for the MCA or EMEA, and then to the regulatory affairs department. Do not do an MBA after at least 3 years in the industry and if regulatory is your field, work for a couple of years in that field, move out to do training or in the MCA, and go back in. The UK, thankfully, is the epicentre of EU pharmaceutical industry, which means that from there, a multinational

might accept an offer of moving you to any part of the world you would like, if you are prepared for the post, obviously.

- But above all, set yourself your career path and what you like, sales is a different ball game, true you can make it to chairman... but most don't pass sales. Once you get in, get a clear idea of the company's idea of what it requires from you, and from everybody, stick to it. Shortcuts end up being very, very expensive, there is always a way, safer & shorter, to solve the immediate problem.
- A directorship, is a mixture of factors, courage, good personal abilities, ability to adapt, ambition, and above all, that you are trustworthy, clear minded and realistic, and like with most things in life, luck, the right person, for the right job, at that particular moment.
- What are your hobbies and interests?
- A typical work interview question!! One may think that with all that I am doing, how do I fit in other activities? Well, work and studying are hobbies. I am preparing myself to do the "Camino de Santiago" that is a 600 mile cycle tour around the north of Spain in the summer through the countryside from the border with France to Santiago de Compostela, I thoroughly recommend it, the enrolling list is open. Also in my frequent travels to Madrid I make the time to go to El Prado and other museums and exhibitions there, as well as those in Seville. I belong to the association friends of the Opera House of Seville, that provides evenings of relax during the opera season. In the winter I go skiing and in the summer I do Kite surf, as well as underwater diving. And most weekends of winter you will find me in a nice countryside house in the mountains, in rural environment.
- Is there anything else you would like to add for the interest of School of Pharmacy alumni?
- A pharmacy degree is a key that can open many doors, which ones you decide at the beginning of your professional career, will most probably affect the rest of your life. A SOP graduate can be proud of SOP and can go anywhere in the world and become a winner and hold many positions. There is no such thing as ethical barriers; those barriers are the ones we allow to stand through commodity or stereotypes. I agree with whom who said "Success is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration".
- A degree is not just studying, is more than that; one must have an eye on the academic and the other in life. I do not know anyone who does not say that their degree years were the best years of their lives, make sure you can say the same for yourself, do not miss opportunities in life, keeping an eye on the target.