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In this episode, Taren Grom, Editor-In-Chief of PharmaVOICE magazine meets with Jessica Rousset, Chief Operating Officer, Cure Pharmaceutical.

Taren: Jessica, welcome to the PharmaVOICE WoW Podcast Program.

Jessica: Thank you for having me.

Taren: It's our pleasure. You know you have a really interesting résumé. I'd love for you to talk about your career path from a technology development officer to a lead technology role at the Children's Hospital of Los Angeles and now as Chief Operations Officer at Cure Pharmaceutical Corp. What has it been like for you over your career?

Jessica: Great question to get us started, and I didn't predict my path when I was fresh out of engineering school, and I'll start by sharing an anecdote. I was a young graduate right out of engineering school, and I had my first job at GlaxoSmithKline Biologicals right outside of Brussels where their vaccine operation is. I was working in the lab, working on a cancer vaccine and the human research department at GlaxoSmithKline was really very powerful and certainly understandably, I have a greater appreciation for that now in terms of looking at human capital and how precious it is.

In any case, they put me through a number of psychological tests, and this was sort of the first aha moment I had when they came back and told me that really they didn't see me as a sort of a career scientist, but rather in marketing. And that was sort of the first jolt that I had in – and frankly, I was a little bit insulted by that, but it made me think. Wow, okay, maybe my best laid plans are not going to be what I think and not come exactly to fruition the way I had envisioned. But I was very fortunate actually at Glaxo because I started in the lab and they put me on a rotating position, so I was involved in international clinical trial monitoring and in corporate strategy. Sort of what came sort of emerged from that early experience was that I was quite comfortable crossing disciplines and being sort of in positions where there was a convergence of disciplines. While there was great opportunity for me there, I do have dual citizenship; I'm French-American and I really wanted to see what adventures might lay ahead in the United States.

So I set sail to California and joined the Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla. It was quite eye opening actually, because it's such a different organization, a small academic institution with a very different culture and very different sort of power dynamics with researchers bringing in grant dollars and they have the power. So it was just a really big shift for me. But in terms of experience, I really started to dive into sort of understanding early discoveries and bench science and sort of using your creativity imagination to really understand what kind of products and commercial embodiments could come of this early work and learning how to protect the intellectual property and package the data and the IT to really achieve that goal, which is to deliver valuable and meaningful improvement to society as a whole.

But again, this was sort of the same theme was kind of emerging as I was very comfortable in this convergence of disciplines where I had to learn to speak and understand science, be comfortable with sort of with the law whether it's IT law or contract law and of course understanding business opportunities and how to structure deals and negotiate deals, so again that sort of same theme emerge and then after five years of being at Scripps I just feel that I had sort of reached my plateau of learning and I set my eyes on an opportunity to truly take everything that I had learned there and I will say that it's important to recognize that no place is perfect and really learning what works and what doesn't work is just as valuable to take being all of those experiences, good and bad and to build my own operation.

And so I joined Children's of LA. I think I was you know just before turning 30 to really start a tech transfer operation from the ground up and that's where I spent the biggest chunk of my career so far. I stayed there for 10 years growing the role from sort of a one-person tech transfer office to an innovation center and reinventing my role several times throughout those 10 years and also in a way putting CHLA on the map as a leader in pediatric innovation and that's really a legacy that I cherish.

And then I made the move to Cure a couple of years ago. Again, a pretty, a very different environment, early stage, small pharma company primarily because I was a believer in the technology and when they get into this a little bit, Cure has a proprietary platform technology to improve the delivery of medications and its core technology is its oral thin film that allows for precise dosing of medications without using, without swallowing, without water and taste-masking, so lots of really attractive features to delivery medication to children.

And, in fact, at CHLA we had several ongoing collaborations to get this technology implemented and to deliver drugs to pediatric patients. But I say sort of most importantly, I was inspired by the CEO of Cure and I sort of immediately felt that we

shared a vision, a philosophy and a set of values and ultimately that's what proved my decisions and that's where I am today.

Taren: Fascinating. So starting off in the bench and now ending up in basically a technology company. A perfect example of where you start isn't necessarily where you're going to end up.

Jessica: Very true.

Taren: And it's having the foresight and the courage to take some risks and being agile with your career. So kudos to you. I want to talk just a little bit more about your time at Children's Hospital. You led one of the innovation technology solutions for pediatric patients. Talk to me about what that was like because that's just such a special cohort of patients when you're dealing with kids. So talk to me a little bit about that experience.

Jessica: Sure. Thinking back on my tenure at Children's it was both incredibly challenging and incredibly rewarding at the same time, so on the one hand I worked with innovators, clinicians and entrepreneurs to help them bring new solutions to clinic and market for pediatric patients. The challenge there was not so much to identify the unmet need because there were plenty and there were a lot of great technologists so finding good solutions was also not the challenge, but it was really – well, the challenge was to identify and define business models where a return on investment could be made.

So we had to generate data sets or understand the data behind that really didn't exist. So for example, understanding the health economic implications of the standards of care, the status quo and then understanding the cost effectiveness of a proposed intervention and in the very niche diseases in patient populations a lot of that data just didn't exist and it also meant educating investors about some unique regulatory pathways for rare conditions whether it's on the drug side or the device side and convincing them of the viability, for example, of reimbursement strategies when markets are very small and so payments and reimbursement becomes really critical to the survival of a new venture.

So we really had to work against many unproven business models and to your point sort of combating the fear of working with vulnerable patient populations, but that really did need better solutions. So that was sort of one set of challenges in working in the space and trying to bring new solutions to market, but on the other hand – and this is not in a place specific to pediatrics, but I had to work with hospital administrators and physicians to adopt new technologies or interventions and usually was limited to no budget.

So I have my operation was started by the hospital and then in part with grants, but it wasn't – it was on a shoestring really and so I'm sure if any of your listeners work in large organizations and particularly academic medical centers, aligning all these different stakeholders to do something very new and related to patient care is like moving a mountain, but – and I would say that healthcare innovation and large organizations is really one of the most challenging thing to take on, but when you're doing it on behalf of vulnerable populations that are just by and large overlooked by industry and for whom solutions are never starting up, specifically develop if solutions are adapted to kids. It really makes for the fight worth fighting and if I look back my greatest fulfillment even there were incremental changes but it did change, it was changing the culture, making people think about the tools that they were using and the adequacy of those tools in terms of the healthcare providers and then more broadly just raising the awareness of the public around sort of the many needs and opportunities to help kids and improve their care, so it's very meaningful.

Taren: That's wonderful. Yeah. It sounds like really meaningful work and really fulfilling work, and I was giggling because you're talking about on a shoestring budget, so how much innovation happened because or because you have no money, so you need to be very creative and clever with the solutions.

Jessica: Very true.

Taren: So kudos to you. So now to current day, you've been at Cure for just over two years as I recall, so what do you think has been the biggest impact you've had on the company so far? And then as a follow up, what's your longer term vision for the organization?

Jessica: Yes. So I've been at Cure for a little over two years and it's been an amazing ride and I – first, I'd like to say that what – at Children's I worked with lots of different innovators, lots of different technologies, lots of different solutions, but at Cure it was really coming to an organization and putting all of this and converging all of my skill sets on sort of one entity, one project, one what I see it as my baby, one baby.

And you know I want to also just sort of give credit to Cure CEO for bringing me on really the change agent. I was brought on to make significant changes with the company and put it on a path to growth. But what I appreciate in the approach was I wasn't sort of given a mandate, as a turnaround mandate with revenue goals within a certain amount of time. I was left to really get a good sense of what the company was about and get to know the people and really understand – given a lot of latitude to figure out how I was

going to change things and the way I chose to change things was to sort of take a giant step back and think about the why.

Why does the company exist? What are we doing? What connects us all here? And do that sort of deep introspective work of positioning ourselves, understanding our values, understanding our why and aligning everyone around that. So we did a lot of exercises around competitive positioning and setting our mission, etc. But I would say that if having done that and setting those really important foundation was the best way to make those important changes and we did. We changed a lot of the team as I'm sure you can appreciate a founding team of a company.

It's not necessarily the right team to lead it into a growth phase, so we had to make some pretty difficult decisions and a lot of big radical change, but I think there's a way we were able to do that and I think a positive and constructive way wants to take that step back and really redefine who we were and we wanted to be as a company. So two years later, we have a great team and I think we're sort of now pivoting into a high growth phase with a unique culture and that's something that's extremely important to me is to build a very mindful and unique culture and we have a platform technology.

So for me the sort of the long term vision of the organization is let's unlock and deploy all the potential of the technology across many different industry verticals because the technology can be applied in a lot of different ways. So my hope is that we can grow while maintaining this unique culture and create offshoots of the company that will tackle all of the market opportunities that are ahead of us.

Taren: That's wonderful. You talked about the culture, so let's go a little bit into what sets Cure apart from some of the other companies that are out there.

Jessica: Great question. Obviously, we all believe the technology is unique, but other companies certainly do what we do. What I come and certainly what I come to recognize whether it's in recruiting because as a young company we don't necessarily have the same ability in terms of compensation. So how do you get people to join your cause and how you get them to share the vision and get the right type of people that will take a risk and believe in what you're doing, and that is the culture.

And the team that we've been building, I do believe when we talk to investors or potential partners, they feel what's special with the dynamic that we have among us and it is a culture of openness and of holding each other accountable and being real with one another and all of us knowing the why. We all know why we're doing what we're doing and we're all growing in the same direction and I just think that it's been incredibly

energizing and it's infectious and people do pick up on it and I think it's what makes a difference between choosing our technology versus another. It's who's behind it and who do we want to work with.

Taren: Excellent. And not to put you on the spot, but you know there are a lot of women in technology, so do you really think you consider yourself to be a role model for those – for other women who may want to pursue a career in technology? I have some friends who are in that tech field and they go to these conferences and they always come back say “Taren, you won't believe but there were only six women in the entire like audience?” Do you feel that also?

Jessica: I think that's certainly still a reality. It's one that now that I have more a leadership role in terms of where I am in my career. It's also a reality that I can change and I can effect and I do take that very seriously and take that responsibility very seriously. One thing I'll share with you is we are currently at Cure looking to expand our board and we're looking to bring a lot of women on the board. We want that diversity and certainly a lot of gender diversity within the leadership as a company.

Taren: Excellent. Well, good for you all. I think that is the way that it's going to change like how it's going to move the needle.

Jessica: Yeah.

Taren: So let's talk about what excites you about healthcare today because obviously you could apply your talent anywhere, but you have chosen the healthcare field. So what is it about healthcare that attracted you? I mean what is it about healthcare that really excites you?

Jessica: Wow. Obviously, a big chunk of my career has been in healthcare innovation, so I just get excited by new things easily and I've seen a lot of new discoveries and technologies and ultimately certainly what drives me and excites me about healthcare innovation is where we can have the biggest impact in terms of unmet needs and of course spending a lot of time catering to the needs of children is extremely animating and motivating. But I'll say in just thinking about this more so from where I stand right now with Cure and some of the work we're doing and I don't know if this is a bit controversial, but I'm really fascinated by sort of the endocannabinoid system and looking at sort of cannabis overall as a new area for medicine just understanding the physiology of the endocannabinoid system where it's still pretty much in its infancy. So it just opens so much potential down the road for targeting different diseases and new

ways, and I think the sort of an overarching theme that's been really intriguing me and I'll talk a little bit about just controlled substances in general.

I've been fascinated by some studies and advances looking at usually like Schedule 1 controlled substances that are really being looked at to address some intractable diseases particularly with mental health and I'll give you as example a recently approved drug, the drug ketamine, the product called Spravato to treat depression and using, approaching it in a very novel way in terms of mechanism. There's also some really encouraging data, clinical data with MDMA to treat PTSD. You have multi-like Ibogaine for addiction, caryophyllene for depression. So I just feel that – and perhaps this is the cannabis, the openness to cannabis that has also opening people's minds to looking at these controlled substances that are defined by the government as having no medical benefit, that's what a Schedule 1 drug is, but being looked at in these really areas that have – where a lot of the current solutions have failed patients.

So I've been kind of keeping an eye on that and really very intrigued to see what kind of advances will be available to patients as we study these kinds of drugs that has been sort of off limits for many, many years. So that's sort of one big area that I've had had my eye on and I'm just interested in again because we're active in the pharmaceutical cannabinoid space, but I'll also tell you and this is less about what excites me, but I think what animates me and certainly since joining Cure, because Cure was founded on the promise of ensuring accessibility and affordability of medication is looking at and contributing to the cost effectiveness of drugs and seeing cost of drugs go down and become more available and accessible to patients. So that's another sort of area that in terms of innovation and business on innovation that I have my eye on and that sure we'd like to certainly move the needle on.

Taren: Fascinating. Thank you so much for sharing that. That's great. We'll keep an eye on those things as well and anything to bring down the cost to drugs is always a good thing. You've had a career that isn't punctuated by many memorable moments, can you identify one wow moment of your career for us, something that really if you look back on and say that was really a defining moment for me?

Jessica: Yes. One moment or experience that I thought I would share was when I was at Children's LA and I was on maternity leave with my second child, my daughter and while I was on leave I decided to write my first grant and this was a grant to the FDA to fund the pediatric technology accelerator. It was my first grant and it got funded and that grant was sort of the birthing of the vision that I had during this period of motherhood that I was experiencing for the second time and with this grant it really was financial freedom.

It was my ability to sort of reinvent my role as a PI on a grant and with funding that would allow me to do things that were sort of outside the box and outside what was sort of established for my role, so it expanded sort of my reach and more importantly it elevated the needs and opportunities in pediatric innovation. And in fact, that small grant now led to it sort of spurred two additional grants at two different sites for \$13 million for pediatric innovation. So it was a defining – it just was a defining moment of independence and freedom and reconnection with my entrepreneurial spirit I would say. So it was defining and was very much a tie to creation, having my second child and having this happen during that moment of creation, so that's what I wanted to share.

Taren: That's awesome. So let's move from that one success which is pretty tremendous to how you celebrate successes today. So how is it you inspire your team? How do you really revel in those milestones and achievement and goals?

Jessica: Yeah. I would say that I've been much more mindful about leadership and inspiring and motivating since being at Cure because that's been a big area of focus as we build the company. A lot of it is how we communicate and how we act and it's in the small things. We have monthly staff meetings. I always really center myself because I think what's critical is when you deliver a message it needs to ring genuine. It has to be real and that is generally connecting with my hopes, my fears, my excitement, but as a leader also always think positive because word that she's a believer and we have to stay positive even if things can be challenging.

So it's just being honest with myself and conveying messages in a vulnerable and honest and open way. I've also been very mindful to not own ideas and allow other ideas to override mine and to show that that's okay. The more ideas, the better and that there's no ownership of ideas. You should be willing to sort of take on someone else's idea and elevate it. And then of course appreciating people and I think also helping out in areas that wouldn't be expected. So I mean that's a little bit more expected in a small company where if I have to sit down with someone and do some data entry with them, I want to show that I'm here to help no matter what. Nothing is above anyone and we're all there to help each other out.

So that's sort of my approach to hopefully inspire people is to appreciate them, enable them and be their biggest sort of champion and not taking ownership of ideas. And then in terms of success, that's really an interesting topic to reflect on for me. As I was thinking about success, for me it's really about earning the opportunity to continue to learn and to create and to grow as an individual and really that's a huge privilege. It's a

gift and if you keep having these opportunities to learn and create and grow then by all measures that's success.

That means you're succeeding and I've had to frankly learn to pause and celebrate success because I think by the sort of the definition that I just gave you or my definition of success, it's more of a continual process of growth and change, but it does – it is very important to take a pause and to reflect on some successes whether they're small or large and I've been better at doing that and it's been manifesting, for example, with just getting together with co-workers and just sort of reflecting on the journey, what we've learned, what was thrilling, what was nerve-wracking and bonding around these chapters that we're experiencing together and then of course taking time to thank people.

I think just breaking bread and connecting in a special environment outside or sort of your daily environment before jumping into the next thing and that's not – when you're sort of that person of today, next-next. That's not even what I do but I found myself doing it and really recognizing the value of doing that and then there's also just doing it for yourself, just treating yourself for some time off, committing yourself to doing nothing. That is so important and I've really only started with the appreciating how important that is.

Taren: Exactly, that's it. Is it that 20 minutes you found in between the projects? Hey, I'm kidding. It is hard. I talk to a lot of fantastic leaders, and the traits you just described are really at the top of when the collective, of looking at collaboration and sitting back and rolling your sleeves up and being part of that team. The skill set weren't necessarily recognized 15 years ago. It's key leadership skills, but they are becoming far more important in today's ecosystem, so great for you. And finally, what's the one piece of advice that you would give to your younger self? If you knew back then, something that would help you today, what would it be?

Jessica: Hindsight is always 20/20.

Taren: Yeah. That's always in our head I get it, but...

Jessica: But no, that's a great question and as I think about that certainly, and this I think has been with me always is doing things – doing work that I feel is important and meaningful, so that's I think a given. You should do what you think is – do things that you think are important, but the advice I would give myself is making sure that your workplace values you because if you don't feel valued you should leave and you shouldn't force something that doesn't fit or no longer fits and it's not easy to have that clarity, strength and wisdom to recognize it and take action and perhaps a younger self,

you have to learn the lesson because it does come with age and wisdom I believe and having the strength to be able to choose where you go, to find a gig where you can be yourself where you feel supported because work is hard.

We choose these challenging, meaningful jobs, but they are difficult and you need to put all of your energy into the work that you love and you need to – it's important to do that rather than dealing with politics of survival. And when you do that and you're in that kind of environment, the sky truly becomes the limit, and it's very empowering.

Taren: That's great. So I want to thank you so much for sharing some of your insights, your journey with us. It was great to get to know you a little bit better and I look forward to what you have in store for the future. Thanks for being part of our WoW Podcast Program.

Jessica: Thank you Taren. It's been great and I really appreciate the opportunity. *Thank you for listening to this episode of WoW – the Woman of the Week podcast series. And thanks again to Micromass for sponsoring this program. For more information on Micromass, please visit micromass.com. We also encourage you to listen to additional episodes at pharmavoices.com/wow.*