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In this episode, Taren Grom, Editor-In-Chief of PharmaVOICE magazine meets with Sheri Madrid, Executive Director, Clinical Operations at Advanced Clinical.

Taren: Sheri, welcome to the PharmaVOICE WoW podcast program.

Sheri: Thank you so much. I'm very happy to be here.

Taren: Sheri, you've had a really far reaching career, starting off in clinical research, then med device then consulting and now in clinical operations. What drew you to the clinical world?

Sheri: When I was in college, my plan was always to go to medical school. I loved everything about science. I loved everything about the body. It was fascinating to me how our bodies work, even down to the cellular level. So I started working in hospitals to get experience and to prepare to apply to medical school. I worked as an anesthesiologist assistant in the OR and I saw many fascinating surgeries there that I love, and then I worked in labor and delivery as a surgical technician assisting with the delivery of babies, which was amazing and I loved all of that.

But by the time I had graduated from college I had pretty much decided that while I loved the body, I didn't actually want to practice medicine. So I started looking for something else that would allow me to work in a field where I could still be involved in some way with the human body and I was still being helpful in some way, and so I literally just started applying everywhere to any position that looked even remotely close to what I was thinking of. And I just happen to accidentally, I guess, apply for a job at a CRO and I didn't even know what a CRO was, but I loved it from my first day, and I've been in the clinical research industry ever since.

Taren: That's fantastic. Thanks for sharing your journey. I also know that you're a busy lady, that you've got kids and you've got another life. How have you navigated your career while balancing work and life?

Sheri: I'm glad you're asking it because I think it is something really difficult for women because we are torn between wanting to work and wanting to help but also

feeling like we want to be with our families. And so before I was married and had children I was very focused on working hard and learning as much as I could about clinical research, and I traveled to a lot of places in the world and I really wanted to help and do feel like I helped a lot of people, my co-workers, study subjects, investigators, research coordinators and after I had children, I still really wanted to work and to help others as much as I could, but I also felt that I needed to be involved with my family.

So I made the decision that until all of my children were out of school that I would focus on clinical research positions that allowed me to work remotely and that, to me, was very important. Fortunately in the clinical research industry there are remote positions out there and that has allowed me to personally feel that I can work hard, but still be a good wife and mother to my family.

Taren: That's awesome. With your considerable experience, you could have worked almost anywhere; as you said, you've had a number of different positions in clinical research. What was it about the culture of Advanced Clinical that appealed to you for your current position?

Sheri: I am very glad that you asked this question. I have worked in both the CRO and the sponsor side of the business and I can honestly say that I love both. But when I interviewed at Advanced Clinical what I was struck by was the honesty, the kindness and the transparency of the interviewers, which may sound odd and I had never had an experience like that before where I felt that right away from the people that were interviewing me.

The company promotes a philosophy of servant leadership, so you are serving your co-worker, you are serving the industry and that aligned perfectly with my own personal values of helping others. So it was very clear to me during that interview that well of course you need to run a profitable business, the leaders in the company were very much about always doing the right thing and it was honest and to tell you the truth it was actually very touching and I've never had an experience like that during an interview before and it touched me. And that in addition to the great technology that they had invested into the company made me want to be a part of Advanced Clinical.

Taren: Would you say that culture starts at the top of the organization and it works its way down or is it also start from the ground and work its way up? Is it multi-layered there?

Sheri: You know what, if I'm being honest from the top down because if you have great leaders that are propagating this culture of honesty and transparency and they will tell you the good, they will tell you the bad, but you always know what's going on and you

can see them always doing the right thing as it trickles kind of out throughout the organization everybody else I find wants to be like that. I know that that's what's happened to me that I see the leaders above me acting in that way and even if I was naturally that way, if I didn't feel like the leaders were going to support me that way, I might not be as open with it. But because it's so open here I feel I can be that way too and I think that that is the key difference at Advanced Clinical in the culture. That's why the culture is the way it is. It comes from the top down.

Taren: And with that culture – you keep talking about this open kind of philosophy, does that give you a certain amount of freedom to take some calculated risks to be a little bit more out of the box in terms of your approach?

Sheri: Yeah, absolutely. I definitely feel supported if I disagree with something. I can even disagree with somebody very senior to me and that's okay. We can have a healthy conversation about it. We can propose new ideas. I feel like they're heard. Yeah, absolutely, I think the culture contributes very much to out-of-the-box thinking.

Taren: So thinking about out-of-the-box thinking, as somebody who is really a seasoned clinical ops executive, what are some of the biggest trends you're seeing today and how were you going to be adjusting to those trends?

Sheri: One of the things that I seem to see more often is that the type of study data being collected is coming from a much wider variety of sources. So this could be data coming from a local lab, a central lab, there's wearable devices now, there's lab images, there's photographic images, I mean there's just this wide array of data sources now and in the past most data was simply just directly recorded onto a case report form. Now, you need to have a technology platform that allows for a clean, simple way to collect all that data and then compile it into an analyzable format. And in addition to that, you actually have to have an expert on your team who knows how to pull all that data together, so this is quite different than I would say even 10 years ago.

Taren: And with that data coming from so many different sources, what kind of pressure does that put on the system?

Sheri: Yeah. I mean you definitely have to have an IT team that knows all of the work that you're doing, so they have to understand all the data that's being collected so your IT team needs to be strong and capable which of course Advanced Clinical has and then you need to have the expertise in the data management group or the bio stats group to be able to pull all that data together. So those two things combined make it work.

Taren: And when you look at the future – and I don't think that that trend is going to go away, I think in fact, it's going to just increase and we're going to find even more places where data is going to come from. Where is the industry going to find those qualified individuals to complete the task necessary to do everything with that data that needs to be done?

Sheri: Yeah. I think our industry as a whole has to get better at mentoring and coaching more junior people that are entering the industry, so people that are graduating from college who have biology degrees or people who are trying to transfer from being maybe a research coordinator over into a monitoring role. I think the industry has to get better at working with individuals who are a little more junior because we need to grow and develop those people so that we can support all of this work that's coming our way. So that is something that I think everybody needs to be working on.

Taren: I agree. I think that's going to be a big pressure on the industry going forward. As much as that is a challenge, what are the things that really excites you about where you see the industry headed?

Sheri: As you know, I'm very interested in helping people. I get a lot of personal joy out of feeling like I'm helping somebody and one other thing that I'm seeing in the industry is that sponsors and CROs are trying to make things simpler for study subjects. So as the studies themselves might become a little more complex and we're collecting data from this wider variety of sources I'm also seeing companies do things like hire travel services to help subjects get to their study visits. I'm seeing medical devices be designed so that it's very easy for subjects to use them and understand them.

There's now electronic informed consent for study subjects. There's electronic study questionnaires where they can answer those questions maybe on their phone, their own phones or an iPad. So while this all does help the sponsor collect the data quickly, this is really making a positive impact on study subjects and we have to remember that these study subjects are often in the study because they have health issues which can be very stressful. So in my opinion, they need all the help they can get and helping people in a real way like that is what gets me excited.

Taren: I'm glad to hear it gets you excited and I think that it's exciting to see what's happening in the industry. As you just noted, there are number of recent advancements that are being put forward in that call to patient-centricity and study subjects in clinical trials are one of the most underutilized aspects of the industry today. Would you not agree with that and anything that helps patients get into clinical trials and stay in clinical trials can only be a boon?

Sheri: Oh yeah, absolutely. And you know to me, that's actually one of the frustrating things is that the trials are out there, like if they're listed on clinicaltrials.gov and so many people don't even know that these trials are going on. I wish that there was a better way for everybody to know about these trials going on. I think that's something in the industry we need to be continually working on.

Taren: Agreed. Throughout your career, you have gone through a number of transformations and I'm sure you've had many memorable career moments, can you share one such wow moment with us?

Sheri: Yeah, I would love to. There are many, but the one that really sticks out to me is years ago I was taking a training course on the GROW model and you probably have heard of the GROW model, but the GROW model is basically a method for goal setting and problem solving. So the G in GROW stands for goals. What goals do you want to have? R is for reality. What's your reality? What are you doing today? What's happening today? O is for options. What are your options? And then W is for way. Which way are you going to go?

So the instructor was having us practice with another classmate how to help a peer or a direct report find a solution to their own problems rather than just me coming in and fixing it for them. So during a break, I just happen to receive a phone call from one of my direct reports who I had been really struggling with and I decided to test this method on him during the phone call. He didn't know I was doing this and he was complaining to me again about an issue and wouldn't you know it, it totally worked and by the end of the call he had found his own solution to that problem and he was so happy and so excited about his plan of action and he actually mentioned to me during that call that he felt listened to and empowered and that was quite an eye opening experience for me.

I learned that sometimes one of the best things we can do as leaders is in order to help someone is actually to stop talking and to listen and just ask questions and coach people to finding their own solutions.

Taren: That's an excellent segue into my next question to you is if you had to describe what your leadership style is, what would it be?

Sheri: I'm told I am very open-minded and fair. I can very easily see both sides of a situation, so I tend to just listen carefully, ask some questions and then make a decision. So I'm very trusting and I assume that you will do whatever you committed to doing, so I will trust until you give me a reason not to and then if we need to make some adjustments or course correct then we'll those conversations. But I also believe in coaching others to help them find solutions to their own problems and when people find their own solutions

to a problem rather than me telling them what the solution is they're going to be more engaged in that solution, when it's their own idea and in that way you can help them grow. You can help your team grow by not just always walking in and fixing the problem for them.

Taren: That's excellent. It ties back to your earlier comment about the need for the industry to mentor up and coming professionals within the clinical research space. Do you have some mentoring tips for some other folks that they could employ as they look to build up their talent as well?

Sheri: Yeah. We have done some mentoring here and actually Advanced Clinical has a program here called Advanced Clinical University that is really a great example of a fantastic mentoring opportunity for CRAs that are trying to enter the industry. So Advanced Clinical University is a remote course where individuals, I don't know maybe somebody graduating from college or somebody who the clinical research coordinator who's trying to get their foot in the door to become a CRA for example.

They will take these online courses basically and then they have the opportunity to go out into the field with one of Advanced Clinical CRAs and shadow them. And there's direct hands on mentoring that goes on with these individuals who were trying to just get a break into the industry and for CRAs especially and I'm sure you probably know this, it's a real catch-22 because people don't want to hire individuals unless they have experience as a CRA, but yet how do you get the experience to become a CRA unless somebody gives you break.

Taren: It's a catch-22, yeah.

Sheri: It is a true catch-22 and it really like it just kind of lock almost. So Advanced Clinical is trying to address that by offering this Advanced Clinical University to individuals and then when you do hire people you need to have a very solid on-boarding and Advanced Clinical does something where we assign them a mentoring buddy when they're hired and they have that buddy for awhile. And the buddy basically is to help them with anything. If you just want to talk over a cup of coffee or you have a question about a system or a process or a tool, they can do that.

It's just an automatic friend really that you have when you start at a company and for CRAs that if they go out in the field they may be accompanied by another CRA who's more experienced so it's very, it has to be very intentional I think when you're mentoring somebody. It can't be this informal thing that you do and Advanced Clinical definitely does that. We've got formalized blueprints on things that we do so that we can help

people as not only they enter the industry, but as they enter the company. I think that's very important.

Taren: Excellent. Thank you so much. If you had to pick one word to describe yourself – and I know that's a tough challenge, but what would it be and why?

Sheri: So I thought about this and I actually think I would have to say integrity and integrity means doing the right thing even when no one is watching and we've all had those moments when you and only you have to decide who you really are and I will do the right thing even if it's difficult. And actually I think that's why I'm such a good fit at Advanced Clinical because Advanced Clinical holds the exact same philosophy.

Taren: Fantastic. And finally, what's the one piece of advice you would give to your younger self? If you could turn back the clock, what would it be?

Sheri: What I would tell my younger self is to not be so caught up in the busyness of the work, but really pay attention to the people that are around you. Everyone has a talent or something to offer and there is something to learn from everyone even those individuals that are frustrating you or you feel like they're not doing so well. But if you pay attention, you will learn the right things to do. You're going to learn maybe the wrong things to do and you learn okay, I'm not going to do that and you'll learn the kind of person that you want to become as you grow in your career. So I was very driven and very busy 20 years ago and I'm sure I could have learned a lot more from people I was working with back then if I had paid more attention.

Taren: That's excellent advice. Thank you so much. I think that even today we could still use that advice as we move through our careers.

Sheri: Yeah. I definitely feel I'm much more open to that now.

Taren: Wonderful. Sheri, thank you so much for spending some time us and for being part of our WoW podcast program.

Sheri: Thank you. I really appreciate being invited and I'm so happy that I could be here.

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