

WOMEN TO WATCH

Life-changing efforts

The power of genetics led **Deya Corzo** and her team to a rare treatment

“If you have something to offer, you will be given a seat at the table.”

COMPANY: Genzyme Corp.

Title: Senior medical director

Age: 40

Education: M.D., Universidad Industrial de Santander, Colombia

BY KEITH REGAN
Special to Mass High Tech

A medical school course in genetics changed Deya Corzo’s outlook on medicine. In turn, her research and leadership work has helped change the lives of thousands of people with a rare disorder and has provided renewed hope to millions more.

Corzo was recently promoted to senior medical director at Genzyme Corp., and since 2001 she had been the doctor overseeing the biotech’s company’s efforts to create a treatment for Pompe Disease, a rare, debilitating and often fatal neuromuscular disease. Those efforts led to the approval by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration of Myozyme in April 2006. Today, hundreds of people in 30 countries receive the treatment.

“To go from having a condition where there’s no hope to the potential of it being treatable and being able to regain quality of life is very rewarding for the team,” Corzo says. “It’s not only that it is the first treatment for a neuromuscular disease, but it’s the innovation behind it. The way the trials were designed, the way families and patients were supported, the way Genzyme was open and generous in terms of collaboration — it made it an incredible experience.”

Corzo, 40, was in medical school in her native Colombia when a course in genetics ignited her imagination.



STUART GARFIELD

“I remember thinking this must have been what physiologists in the Renaissance felt, when all of a sudden they were able and allowed to dissect the human body — and what that did to the study of physiology,” Corzo recalls. “Suddenly, we are able to open up what had been a completely hidden box of information that can explain so much about human disease.”

Following medical school, a fellowship at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute and a residency in pediatrics, Corzo worked as a clinical fellow in genetics at Boston Children’s Hospital. In 2001, Genzyme offered her a chance to help lead the interdisciplinary team of researchers already working on the Pompe treatment. Corzo’s passionate belief in the power of genetics to improve lives helped sustain the research along its long and difficult path to approval, colleagues say.

For Corzo, Genzyme offered a chance to bring a different cultural approach and broader resources to bear on genetics research. She also found an urgency that motivated researchers during the arduous journey to approval for Myozyme, which required novel approaches to clinical trials because the disease is so rare — about 10,000 people worldwide are known to be afflicted, according to Genzyme.

Corzo believes the field of genetics, which she says holds great promise to treat the “big diseases” such as cancer and heart disease, is well-suited for women who want to achieve great things.

“If you have something to offer, you will be given a seat at the table,” she says. “When you are in a field in which innovation is key for success, things have to happen quickly. The artificial barriers that preclude women’s best participation in other areas — they don’t exist.”