

PROFILES

Gerianne Tringali-DiPiano Bets the Femme Pharma



In 1996 Gerianne Tringali-DiPiano had more than two decades of experience as a pharmaceutical executive. She saw how the women's health industry had focused on contraception and hormone replacement therapy, but had left a yawning void by virtually ignoring other diseases and disorders. She decided she could—and would—do something about it.

That something was founding FemmePharma Global Healthcare Inc., to focus on therapeutic areas disproportionately affecting women's unmet needs. As president, CEO and chairman, Tringali-DiPiano oversees the company's move into Phase 2 for fibrocystic breast disease, a therapy to treat urinary incontinence in Phase 2 clinical trials, and products to treat dysmenorrhea menstrual cramps and dysfunctional uterine bleeding.

Although she had a one-year-old daughter when she started FemmePharma, and her venture capitalist husband warned that it could take \$1 billion and working night and day without any income to get it off the ground, Tringali-DiPiano rolled the dice. "No one is ever prepared for entrepreneurship but I had a combination of technical, scientific and commercial skills and was a good student with wonderful trainers and mentors," she said. "I also have a lifelong love of, and relationship with God and knew that if this didn't work it's because He had a different plan for me."

Tringali-DiPiano grew up in Central Maryland, the daughter of an even-tempered and well-liked food business entrepreneur and a tenacious, tough-minded homemaker mom. A born scientist, she spent her free time experimenting and problem solving. After earning a bachelor's degree from Marquette University and an MBA from St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, Tringali-DiPiano, who is 50, took a job at American Hospital Supply Corp., which was soon acquired by Baxter HealthCare. After almost six years in sales, marketing, market and systems planning, Tringali-DiPiano moved into medical affairs at Bristol-Myers Squibb and then to a four-year post at Sterling-Winthrop as product director in the diagnostic imaging arena. Next it was on to Wyeth-Ayerst where she was a senior executive in new product development and then global licensing.

The demands of running her research-and-development-focused organization change from moment to moment. She spends perhaps ten percent of her time in the lab, the rest researching patent ideas, shaping the company's strategy, dealing with the FDA and other agencies and medical and scientific societies, and fund-raising. While Tringali-DiPiano ardently hopes to go public in the next three to five years, there are three investment groups now who have invested in the company and provided them with the capital which is the fuel for their development activities. She meets with them regularly.

Tringali-DiPiano created FemmePharma's first drug for endometriosis, FP1096, which she sold in May 2005 to KV Pharmaceutical Co. in a wrenching move. "This was my baby but we needed to get it marketed well and into the hands of practitioners faster." She says. "I learned that no matter how much you love something, you have to think of what is best for the end user, the women who will benefit from it."

Thinking of them is what keeps her tethered. "Whenever I meet a woman with a condition from which she suffers without respite, I remember how valuable the work I do is and pursue it with more vigor," she says.

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Although starting FemmePharma was a great accomplishment, it is not the crowning one in Tringali-DiPiano's life. That honor goes to birthing and rearing Erin, now 11. Having a daughter made her fearless. "I realized there was nothing in business that I was afraid of. The only fears I have are of losing Erin and dying before seeing her reach womanhood." Before Erin arrived "my fears were all about prestige and title." This straightened her priorities. Tringali-DiPiano and her husband Michael have not ruled out adopting another child. And despite a schedule saturated with work she still finds time to horseback ride in preparation for competition in dressage, and play guitar.

Still, she says, her biggest problems revolve around finding enough time—and resources—to move products through clinical trials and get them into market. Currently, she's working on a treatment for breast pain, a topical cream that will eliminate the side effects caused by the few available treatments. An FDA-approved prescription medication that typically causes facial hair growth, weight gain and acne; or an OTC pain reliever that does not address the underlying causes of breast pain, a problem that affects 26 million women in the U.S., 15 percent of whom experience symptoms severe enough to warrant medication.

"Finding ways to improve the speed but not compromise the work is very important," she says. Occasionally moving too fast has landed her in the soup. Once she hired the wrong person in a pivotal position that severely disrupted the culture of her Wayne, Pa.-based company. "With a dozen or so people ours is a lock arms sort of place, not a kingdom where a king is anointed."

Tringali-DiPiano learned that technical competency, while important, is second to a good cultural fit and that people from larger organizations may not value the concept of rolling-up-your-sleeves teamwork.

Being a woman is rarely a plus in science but Tringali-DiPiano says it enables her to understand what women want and to be prepared to give it to them.