

Women's diversity benefits Quality Assurance at Cerbios (a HAS Company)



THE QUALITY ASSURANCE TEAM

Chiara Gallotti, QA Director | **Simona Ostini Bortolin**, Team Assistant;
Giovanna Molteni, Senior QA specialist | **Paola Cairolì**, Senior QA Specialist
Livia Orlandi, Senior QA Specialist | **Alessia Parenti**, QA Specialist
Valentina Ubizzoni, intern

It has been a few weeks since the news of Healthcare Advance Synthesis (HAS) acquiring Cerbios-Pharma SA (Cerbios), and we are excited to feature an exclusive interview with the talented women of Cerbios' Quality Assurance (QA) team in our magazine.

Led by Quality Director Chiara Gallotti, the QA department at Cerbios is composed of a dedicated team of ten professionals in total. Their diverse expertise, personalities, and backgrounds uniquely contribute to upholding and advancing the highest quality standards within the pharmaceutical industry.

Talking to CHEMICALS KNOWLEDGE HUB, Chiara emphasised that this diversity amongst the six women on the team has strengthened their approach and enriched the way they work together.

She explained, "Within the HAS group, Cerbios embodies a truly multifaceted organization. In this context, the QA department has the opportunity to engage in a wide range of GMP-related activities. This exposure allows us to gain comprehensive, 360-degree experience – an essential element in ensuring that all quality requirements set by regulatory authorities and clients are consistently met. Quality Assurance is more than just a function; we embody the company's core values to our customers and authorities. We play a critical role in sustaining the organisation's presence in the international and highly competitive pharmaceutical market. The QA team is the guardian of quality and, by extension, of trust, safety and compliance.

Our responsibilities go beyond technical knowledge of pharmaceutical regulations. Being part of QA requires a strong ethical foundation, a high level of accountability and the ability to balance company expectations with regulatory demands. This means not only mastering guidelines and procedures, but also demonstrating determination, adaptability, problem-solving skills and, above all, a deep sense of integrity.

These values are deeply ingrained in our team. Alongside our professional skills, we bring empathy, kindness and a collaborative spirit – qualities that enhance both our work environment and the outcomes we deliver.

In addition, many women on our team, like those balancing family responsibilities, often exhibit strong organisational and problem-solving abilities. This commitment should not be underestimated. While finding a balance between private and professional life is important, achieving it is not always easy."

Other members of the team then joined the conversation.

Have you faced any obstacles within the pharmaceutical industry that were directly related to being a woman?

Alessia: I wouldn't say the obstacles in the pharmaceutical industry are fundamentally different from those in other fields. The challenges stem more from outdated mentalities although, fortunately, these are fading, even if slowly.

In my experience, I've encountered situations that would never happen to a man, especially in certain international contexts. For example, I've been expected to remain silent in meetings or faced inappropriate interview questions about my private life – children, family or time management – topics irrelevant to professional competence. One extreme case: during an interview process, the CEO of a company saw me in the hallway and asked if I'd like to go out with his son!

That said, in my current workplace, I've never felt a gender gap. I've been valued for my contributions, not my identity, and even during sensitive periods like pregnancy, I received unwavering support. This proves that fair, inclusive environments are possible when there's genuine commitment. Change isn't just desirable – it's achievable.

Still, it's undeniable that women often face a rocky path to authority. We're held to impossible standards. Assertiveness brands us as 'aggressive', politeness as 'too soft', raising our voice as 'hysterical' and listening as 'weak'. Every nuance of our behavior is scrutinised through distorting lenses. Qualities like empathy, mediation skills and systemic thinking – clear strengths – are rarely recognised as leadership traits and even when they are, women's career progression tends to lag behind equally-skilled male counterparts. The gender disparity in top roles speaks for itself.

The real breakthrough will come when we stop measuring value against outdated models and start appreciating diverse, equally valid forms of leadership and expertise.

Paola: Throughout my career, I've been fortunate to work in companies where I never perceived differences in treatment or consideration based on gender. I've spent my entire professional life in quality roles, both in Quality Control (QC) and QA, within diverse teams of men and women. In every position I've held, I've never felt disadvantaged compared to male colleagues.

For several years now, I've chosen to work part-time to prioritise my family, especially my children. The companies I've worked for have consistently supported this decision, offering flexibility in working hours, which has been invaluable for maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

I recognise my experience isn't universal. Many women face challenges, as I've learned through friends' and colleagues' stories. I sincerely hope these disparities continue to fade, because professionalism, experience, maturity and collaborative ability aren't defined by gender – they're individual qualities.

What types of skills do women in the pharmaceutical industry need to develop or improve upon?

Giovanna: In my experience, the most important skill women should develop is awareness of their own worth, along with the ability to pursue their goals even in unsupportive environments.

Women already possess all the necessary skills and knowledge – the challenge lies in confidently applying these capabilities when workplace standards don't align with their strengths.

Simona: I believe women have already demonstrated they possess all the qualifications needed for leadership roles in pharma. The global challenge is rather about recognising the value and managerial potential in women – qualities often automatically attributed to men due to cultural biases. Fortunately, progress is being made, particularly in Europe. In Switzerland, we're seeing policies that support parenting, work flexibility and employee wellbeing, which are helping to bridge the gender gap.

Who inspired you, as a younger woman, and what advice would you give to young women aspiring to follow your path?

Valentina: During my studies, I encountered many accomplished women in science, who showed me that success was achievable. Their example helped me turn my ambitions into reality without self-doubt. My advice to young women would be to leverage social networks, which are now integral to our lives, by connecting with female scientists who

use these platforms to inspire others. These role models not only share their passion for science, but also their personal journeys, highlighting both their achievements and challenges. This creates valuable opportunities for reflection and provides practical advice for navigating a field that still presents obstacles for women.

How important is it to educate and mentor emerging female leaders in the industry?

Giovanna: As a mother of a teenage daughter, I believe this is absolutely fundamental. The gradual elimination of stereotypes and gender pay gaps directly correlates with women's growing awareness in STEM fields. That's why education and mentoring should be central throughout the professional development of both young women and men.

In my own career, having enlightened mentors (both women and men) proved essential in helping me recognise my professional worth, completely independent of gender considerations.

Have you observed or experienced any barriers to gaining opportunities that support career progression in the pharmaceutical field? (For example, how individuals are selected for involvement in international activities, team leader, committees, etc.)

Livia: Yes, I have encountered obstacles, though I wouldn't attribute them to gender per se, but rather to the limited perspectives of certain individuals. Interestingly, these barriers have come from both men and women, as they typically originate from rigid mindsets rather than gender bias.

What's crucial to recognise is that true limitations emerge from cultural and personal attitudes. This is why I consider our greatest challenge to be cultivating a cultural shift by creating work environments that are truly open, meritocratic and respectful; environments that actively identify and value each person's unique competencies and professional journey.

How important is networking among women in the pharmaceutical industry both as a way to advance careers, but also as a way for these issues to be discussed?

Livia: Networking plays a crucial role in the pharmaceutical sector, serving as a catalyst

for professional growth, collaboration and knowledge sharing. While creating dedicated spaces to address gender-specific challenges has undeniable value, I believe we should champion inclusive networking that transcends gender boundaries.

The most effective professional networks are those built on diversity, mutual respect and shared expertise. By fostering open dialogue and opportunities that encompass all professionals, we ensure every voice contributes to meaningful progress, ultimately benefiting our entire industry.

This balanced approach allows for both targeted discussions when needed and broader collaboration that drives inclusive advancement.

It is also important to recognise that there will be differences in different disciplines. For example, nutrition often has more females than other fields might have. Has that ever been a consideration in your career choices in the pharmaceutical field?

Paola: No, gender distribution has never influenced my career decisions. Beyond pharmaceuticals, I've held quality roles in both the food and cosmetics industries, where I observed a strong female presence although not significantly different from what I've encountered in pharma.

This may reflect my focus on quality functions, where gender representation tends to be more balanced compared to areas like production or commercial. My career choices have always been driven by professional interests and opportunities rather than gender demographics.

Much of the workforce has been working online or WFH for the past couple of years. Have you noticed whether this new way of working has improved or hindered the situation of women in the workplace?

Alessia: My experience reflects both the promise and challenges of remote work. During my first pregnancy in lockdown, I worked for a company initially resistant to remote arrangements. While pandemic measures eventually created lasting benefits for women, I still faced palpable distrust and had to constantly prove my productivity.

The advantages are undeniable: better work-life balance, time flexibility and reduced commuting.

Remote work has increased inclusion, particularly for women in underserved areas or with family commitments, while boosting autonomy and focus. However, challenges remain: blurred work-life boundaries, reduced visibility and slower professional growth due to less direct interaction.

Fortunately, my current company demonstrates real progress in supporting working mothers. Remote work has given women freedom to manage careers and family without compromise.

However, true innovation will come when we stop viewing work-life balance as a concession and start recognising it as empowerment.

How important is it that young scientists observe women as mentors, speakers and leaders in their field? How much would that help in feeling a stronger sense of belonging and part of the team?

Valentina: Seeing women in leadership roles as mentors and speakers is incredibly valuable. Their visibility gives young scientists the confidence to believe in themselves and pursue their ambitions, while motivating them to strive for continuous growth. These role models serve as living proof that dedication and hard work can lead to recognition and success. Most importantly, they create a powerful sense of belonging, showing everyone that they too can be part of the scientific community's future.

Have you felt more of a camaraderie with female staff and colleagues because of the issues you all face in the pharmaceutical field? Equally, have there been times when you have expected that support and sense of belonging only to find it lacking at your place of work?

Simona: Throughout my years in the pharmaceutical industry, I've been fortunate to work with many women – in fact, more female than male managers in my department. I've frequently experienced a special camaraderie with female colleagues, particularly as women's representation in our field continues to grow.

I find mutual understanding often comes more naturally in direct interactions with women. While I recognise my experience may not be universal, I've consistently found the support and sense of belonging I hoped for from my female colleagues.