



**Oral History Interview with
Angela Betancourt, DVM, PhD, DABT
Safety Lead Reviewer,
Division of Animal Food Ingredients,
Center for Veterinary Medicine**

**FDA Oral History Program
Final Edited Transcript
July 12, 2023**

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Angela Betancourt

Oral History Abstract

Angela Betancourt, DVM, is a toxicologist and a safety lead reviewer in the Center for Veterinary Medicine’s Office of Surveillance and Compliance, Division of Animal Food Ingredients. She joined the FDA in 2012 after earning a Doctorate in Veterinary Medicine from Universidad de Caldas, Manizales, Colombia (1998), and both a Master of Science (2002) and a Doctor of Philosophy (2007) degree in environmental toxicology from Mississippi State University. Angela also served as a National Institute of Environmental Health Science post-doctoral fellow (2007-2010) and then a research associate at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (2010-2012). She is actively involved in Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility work at CVM, where she sits on the DEIA Committee for the Office of Surveillance and Compliance and co-leads the CVM DEIA Book Club.

Keywords

Veterinary Medicine; Animal Feed; Toxicology; Diversity & Inclusion; Hispanic Heritage

Citation Instructions

This interview should be cited as follows:

“Angela Betancourt Oral History Interview,” History Office, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Department of Health and Human Services, July 12, 2023.

Interviewer Biography

Vanessa Burrows is an historian who holds a Ph.D. in the History of Public Health and Medicine from the City University of New York's Graduate Center (2015). She joined the FDA History Office in January 2017, where she focuses on the history of medical consumerism, regulatory policy and digital history. She has a background in documentary film, public history and higher education, and her prior work includes associate producer of the 2018 film *Power to Heal: Medicare and the Civil Rights Revolution*. Her research on the history of socially determined health inequities, dynamics of health literacy and the political economy of medical research has been published in the *Journal of American History* and the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Psychology*.

FDA Oral History Program Mission Statement

The principal goal of FDA's OHP is to supplement the textual record of the Agency's history to create a multi-dimensional record of the Agency's actions, policies, challenges, successes, and workplace culture. The OHP exists to preserve institutional memory, to facilitate scholarly and journalistic research, and to promote public awareness of the history of the FDA. Interview transcripts are made available for public research via the FDA website, and transcripts as well as audio recordings of the interviews are deposited in the archives of the National Library of Medicine. The collection includes interviews with former FDA employees, as well as members of industry, the academy and the legal and health professions with expertise in the history of food, drug and cosmetic law, policy, commerce and culture. These oral histories offer valuable first-person perspectives on the Agency's work and culture, and contribute otherwise undocumented information to the historical record.

Statement on Editing Practices

It is the policy of the FDA Oral History Program to edit transcripts as little as possible, to ensure that they reflect the interviewee's comments as accurately as possible. Minimal editing is employed to clarify mis-starts, mistakenly conveyed inaccurate information, archaic language, and insufficiently explained subject matter. FDA historians edit interview transcripts for copy and content errors. The interviewee is given the opportunity to review the transcript and suggest revisions to clarify or expand on interview comment, as well as to protect their privacy, sensitive investigative techniques, confidential agency information, or trade secrets.

Interview Transcript

VB: This is an oral history that is contributing to the FDA oral history collection--and it is a spotlight special emphasis oral history--with Angela Bettencourt, a lead safety reviewer in CVM's Division of Animal Food Ingredients. I am Vanessa Burrows from the FDA History Office. The date is July 12th, 2023 and we are conducting this oral history on Microsoft Teams.

Angela, thank you so much for making time to speak with me today. I'm really excited to learn more about your story. If it's alright with you, I'd like to just start off by asking you to tell us a little bit about your background growing up and about your education.

AB: Sure and thank you for inviting me to this interview, Vanessa. I'm originally from Colombia South America. I am the oldest sibling. I have a younger brother and sister. I grew up in a traditional poor Colombian family. We had access to elementary and high school education because both of my parents worked and I used to take care of my brother and my sister when I was not at school.

So it was a great but very challenging childhood, especially growing up and being the oldest. I felt since my early years that it was my responsibility to help my family financially. Financial improvement was an important factor and a clear goal, in addition to pursuing education. Since I remember in my childhood years my parents encouraged me to be a very good student. And they also told me that you have to study hard to succeed in life. And I took it to heart, I loved studying, and I always believed it will lead me in the way to help my family. I have always been a very good student and I was accepted to veterinary school in a public university in Colombia.

It was a very competitive program, but I was accepted. It was initially a financial struggle because it meant moving to a different city and having many additional expenses. I had several side jobs. I worked as a librarian, video editing and others. In addition, something I did not plan for during vet school was to be a single mother which made life very joyful, but also a little bit more difficult. Fortunately, I finished Vet school. It was a great accomplishment. Not only for myself, but also for my family.

I had the opportunity to comprehend the importance of public health at many levels. I participated in research projects, internships, which opened a window for me and showed me that I still had too many things to learn. Then, I understood that I wanted to continue my education and after graduation in 1998 from veterinary school, I decided pursuing graduate studies.

At that time, there were not many veterinary graduate programs in Colombia. I searched options in other countries in South America, like Brazil and Chile, and also the US. However, at that time, studying in the US looked seemed an unattainable dream. It meant I needed several things I didn't have: money, visa, speak English, and being accepted into a US university.

VB: I'm sorry to interrupt you. That takes so much courage to embark on a graduate education in a different language, in a completely strange place, far away from home. I can't wait to hear more about that part of your life's journey, but I really want to ask you what drew you to study veterinary medicine in the first place?

AB: I always was close to animals. I have this passion for alleviating pain and caring which is especially challenging in animals. My heart was broken with the many homeless dogs and cats in my neighborhood in Colombia. Too many pets lived in the streets in Colombia at that time and

also now. I saw many, many animals suffering in the streets and I think that was the major motivation I had to study veterinary medicine. I was so happy and thrilled when I was accepted to vet school. After I graduated I understood that, there were so many more things I still needed to learn.

In vet school I became interested not only in pets, but in other livestock species and also in other areas of veterinary medicine. It would say it was quite a miraculous journey because the odds were not in my favor. Being a single mother, with very limited resources, I was the first person to graduate with a professional degree in my whole family (very large family, both my mom and my dad had 10 siblings each). So yeah, I'm very thankful now that I think back on those years and the difficulties, but also the joys that I experienced.

VB: So can you tell me a little bit about how you made the huge decision to come study in the United States and uh, what was in store for you when you arrived here?

AB: Yes, absolutely. I think the challenge of such a new experience in every context, including being away from my family, language, culture, you know, different school system. However, after arriving in the US, while transitioning to the novelty of this new country, what attracted the most of my attention was the quality of the veterinary medicine practiced in the US. At that time, I was shocked by the availability of diagnostic tools, and technological advances. I was very fortunate to do voluntary work in a Veterinary clinic in Cicero IL, while I was learning English in Chicago. The clinic specialized in exotic pets and I learned about iguanas, boas, ferrets, birds and many other pets. For me each day at the clinic was like a magical trip. That experience helped me to overlooked all the huge difficulties I was facing. Maybe I minimized

them at that time and since in my mind there was no room for having doubts, I thought I could conquer it all. But still, I remember multiple times when I thought I was not going to make it. I guess persistence and having a family that depended on me, kept me going.

So, if I could summarize it, that will be it. Fortunately, and against many odds, I was able to study English for one year after I arrived in Chicago. I was very frustrated when I arrived in Chicago, the first city I resided in the US, because I could not understand a single word in English. I thought, because I could read and write in English, although not perfectly, it was going to be an easy process for me to speak English, but it wasn't. However, the voluntary work in the Veterinary clinic also helped me to pick up the language specially by listening to clients, listening to the vets in the clinic, interacting with the clients, understanding the different procedures and technologies.

And from there things started to flow. I decided to apply for Graduate School. And I was accepted at Mississippi State University where I earned a Master of Science and a PhD in environmental toxicology, in 2002 and 2007, respectively. While I was there, I conducted research in developmental and molecular neurotoxicology of organophosphate compounds. Then I continued with a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and after my fellowship, I worked as a research associate, also at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. This research background consolidated my scientific curiosity not only in veterinary medicine but also on how much we are exposed to chemicals in our daily life and how much is still unknown.

I also understood I didn't know much of the regulatory framework and the need to learn not only how research is conducted to answer scientific questions, but also how that information is used in the regulatory arena to protect human and animal health. And that's how I got

interested into the FDA. And in 2012, I was very excited to join the FDA as a staff fellow -- as a toxicologist -- that is my journey from Graduate School to the FDA.

VB: I apologize, Angela, I just wanted to ask -- you had many, many years in school and you had such complex and varied research interests and experiences and you had to follow this very courageous and uncertain path. And I was curious if there were any advisors or mentors that supported you along the way that made a difference in your career choices?

AB: Definitely. I mean every in every step in of that research career, I couldn't have made it without my mentors. Starting with my mentors in Vet school in Colombia, the veterinarian at the clinic where I did voluntary work in Chicago, they were my first mentors. They encouraged me to pursue my path -- not necessarily what they thought was good for me, but to follow my path and be the best I could. Also my major professor in Graduate School in Mississippi State University, was a key player -- he trusted me. I am so grateful to him and to every mentor that have become pillars of my progress through the research path, and a big source of inspiration. I am always very grateful to all of them.

VB: That's such a blessing if you've had so many people who've lifted you up. It's wonderful. Thank you for sharing that. I mean, mentorship is sometimes an overlooked, but really, key part of our professional lives, so I just, I was curious to ask. But I did interrupt you. You were just beginning to tell the part of your journey where you arrived at FDA, and I'm really curious to know -- I mean, we all have crossed that bridge into the FDA world and had our own acclimating experiences. But, what was it like when you first arrived at FDA? What was your work

portfolio like or what major projects were you working on and certainly what was it like adjusting to the FDA culture?

AB: Thanks for that question. When I was first offered the job, I was so excited but also I was worried because of my lack of regulatory experience. I felt I started working from zero. And everything was new for me when I joined the FDA – somewhat similar to like coming to the United States for the first time. But, I was so excited. For me it was like learning to read a second time but I was willing to give my best because I knew I needed to catch up. I was nervous. However, I felt so welcomed, despite my limited regulatory knowledge, people in my division embraced me with open arms and helped me navigate those first months on the job. After a few months, I felt like I worked at the division my whole life. I was very fortunate to land in such a great a division. I was very, very fortunate to experience the culture, learn how people were so genuine and generous with their time, and how much everyone wanted me to succeed. And with those all those elements together, and my desire to do a good job helped me in my career as a reviewer. It was a wonderful journey after I joined the FDA.

VB: Did you start out as a safety reviewer?

AB: Yes.

VB: I'm sorry you said you started as a staff fellow, right? OK.

AB: Staff fellow toxicologist.

VB: And did you begin in the Division of Animal Food Ingredients, or have you moved around in CVM?

AB: I did start in the Division of Animal Food Ingredients, previously called Division of Animal Feeds. Initially I was involved with postmarket surveillance where I could use both my experience as veterinarian but also as a toxicologist. Then, I moved to the premarket review process and I had a learning curve because of the more extensive regulatory pathways for animal food ingredients.

VB: So, I'm really intrigued that you started doing postmarket surveillance and moved to premarket review, particularly because you joined right after the melamine pet food crisis and I wonder if that impacted your work environment when you arrived at FDA?

AB: Yes, definitely. And it impacted it in a very positive way because I was so fortunate that some of the experts were in my division, actually on my team. I was able to learn very much from them, especially from one of my mentors -- I had several mentors -- but one of my mentors was a very experienced toxicologist and he was so kind and so generous with his time and knowledge.

VB: And I imagine that was a real sort of trial by fire.

AB: Sometimes they have been, yes.

VB: Were there any other major product reviews -- I mean, obviously not stuff that you can't disclose, but were there any other major reviews or major safety issues that impacted your early career at FDA that come to mind?

AB: Yes, I especially remember a case when we didn't have a precedent for a potential contaminant in a certain type of product that had the potential to impact the safety of some pets -- we didn't have a clear position on the issue. And it was challenging, but at the end I was able, with the help of experts in my division, to have a clear position on it. It was quite an experience not only on having and defending an opinion, but also in transmitting that opinion in the best way possible. I learned that sometimes those opinions are not well received or that there might be received with resistance and you have to be prepared for it.

VB: It's very interesting, especially just with the awareness that in order to respond to a situation that's so sensitive, you really do need to draw on the network of expertise around you and think about a problem from all sides as well as how to present the problem to others, which is certainly perhaps an underappreciated skill that our scientific experts around the agency have to hone.

AB: It was definitively a challenge because of my limited reviewer at the time. However, with the support from all their experts in my division, I gained valuable experience to handle a situation like that one.

VB: So I, you know you've been with FDA and with CVM for 11 years now, three of those years, the last three have been unusual. And I feel like I would be remiss if I didn't ask you how the shift to remote work has impacted your professional work, communication with colleagues, or your research?, and just in general how that transition has impacted you.

AB: It has impacted me considerably because I had to learn how to get in contact with our colleagues, with our supervisor, with working groups in a virtual environment. I guess with time we learned how to get better at it. But I think it's still difficult. The barriers for effective communication could be harder to overcome in the telework environment. Sometimes you are concerned that people might get tired of so many meetings or finding the best time to talk to your colleagues. I noticed also the impact on my coworkers, but I guess on a daily basis I strive to do the best I can with the resources we have right now -- calling people, messaging, taking the opportunity to meet whenever is possible. I think I'm still working on it, I definitely believe that when you are genuine with your colleagues and you show your interest in them, not only in their work but, as human beings, there is more probability to communicate effectively. I just try to do my best. Not perfect, but I keep trying.

VB: Well, I'm not entirely surprised to hear you have such a compassionate response given the fact that you are so committed to advancing CVM's culture through things like the DEIA Book Club and OSC's DEIA Committee, and I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about how you got involved in doing that sort of service and what it involves?

AB: Sure. Initially it was just called diversity and inclusion, and I volunteered to be the representative for my office. I represented the Office of Surveillance and Compliance at CVM. When I started, back in 2018, I had very little knowledge of what was involved. And at that time, we worked on drafting a D&I plan for OSC. Then, the OSC leadership team proposed forming a committee instead of having a single person as D&I representative. With the committee we consolidated our efforts on DEIA at OSC. The committee includes members from every office in OSC and started, I think, working as a group around at 2020.

The committee work closely with the leadership team as an advisory group -- We meet every other week and plan the activities proposed to in the DEIA plan for OSC. We enjoy working together with the goal of promoting DEIA very much. We have grown as a group, and it has been a wonderful experience to be part of the ODEIA committee.

VB: And can you tell me a little bit about how you formed the book club?

AB: CVM had the idea of having a D&I Book club and I volunteered with two other co-workers. It was also a completely new experience for me. We have read by now two books, and it has been a great experience. We select titles based on the group interest. We sometimes watch documentaries. We are very open to suggestions from the members of the club and try to keep a very open informal environment so people feel free to share ideas. We have amazing discussions on a wide variety of topics.

VB: I think it's such a wonderful idea. And I mean from your early experience as a librarian to your current work as a with the book club you are clearly a great booklover, I can tell.

AB: Yes, I am. I wish I could read more books -- and definitely the book club has been an opportunity to learn history, among other things. And history that I was not aware of, and to my surprise, I think other people have also experienced history in a different way. Sometimes not how we learned it from school or the news or other outlets, but more at a personal level. It has been a good opportunity to understand more about the world we live in right now based on what happened many years ago.

VB: Well, you're preaching to the choir. As an historian, I'm with you on that. But I also I just think that the idea of having a book club that celebrates our differences and helps to encourage one another to learn about them is just such a great way to help build or to help broaden that appreciation for seeing things from different perspectives, and that a diverse and inclusive culture really is a real benefit... and as all scientists know, you need to look at issues from so many different angles in order to fully appreciate them. So, I also see continuity in your interest in DEIA and your identity as a scientist.

I did want to ask you -- and it may be one of those kinds of things where it's too early to tell -- but, you are immersed in a field that is really like obviously dedicated to both human and animal health, and hyper aware of the impact of chemicals on the environment. And being involved in that kind of work at a time when the One Health Movement is developing I'm just curious if you've had direct involvement with any One Health research or policy work or programs and what your thoughts about the One Health Movement are?

AB: I think it's one of the best initiatives there is. I currently don't have a direct involvement, but I see the huge importance because in my opinion only that comprehensive approach where you don't see things individually could really help solve key problems we are facing as a country and a society and as a planet right now.

And I think it's the right path and I'm grateful for those great minds that put together the initiative, because I think it could definitely help us to solve problems more efficiently and in a way that it will last over time.

VB: Well, I realize we're drawing close to the end of our time to chat today, but I wanted to ask you, since you've been with the agency for over a decade now, and you've seen a lot of things, I'm curious to know what it is that continues to attract you to your work and FDA. What do you enjoy about doing it and if there's any exciting things on the horizon for you that you'd like to share?

AB: Sure. What continues to attract me is definitely the FDA's mission. The mission is at the heart of my motivation to be part of this great agency. But also, the work culture, the environment of respect, professionalism that makes it a thriving place. Also, the opportunity to work in promoting DEIA has a heavy weight on my desire to continue working at the FDA. When we recognize our differences and are able to bring them to the table, we can work together better in accomplishing the mission of protecting human and animal health.

VB: Well, thank you so much, Angela. I really appreciate you taking the time to speak with me today and to Share your story with the FDA, oral history collection and thank you most of all for

your service to the agency and to the American public. Unless there's anything else you would like to share, I'm going to go ahead and close the recording.

AB: Thank you, Vanessa. Thank you for the opportunity.