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COVID made healthcare regulators look more closely at the diagnostics sector and opened their eyes to the value that proper diagnostics can bring to patients

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Marwa Soliman of blood gas testing pioneer Radiometer explains how the company's operations have developed in the MEA region, growing awareness of the importance of point-of-care diagnostics post-COVID, and how she aims to make sure that patients' lives come first in all of Radiometer's work.

Can you begin by introducing yourself and how you got to where you are today?

I am a pharmacist by training and started my career back in Egypt in 1998. I also worked at the Ministry of Health as a regulatory and pricing specialist, which gave me an overview of how policies and regulations are made in the pharma space.

I then moved into the biopharmaceutical industry, working for a couple of multinational companies including AstraZeneca. During this period, I gained experience in areas such as marketing, brand management, and product launches. I then shifted to the dermo-cosmetics industry and worked as a managing director for the Middle East, GCC, and KSA region.

Two years ago, I joined Radiometer which has a slightly different focus as a medical diagnostics company. I started off taking on the responsibility for the Middle East and North Africa region and since January 2023, my remit has expanded to encompass the entirety of Africa.

How have you learnt on these experiences to drive success at Radiometer?

Drawing on my diverse experience in other industries, my first six months at Radiometer were spent analysing where we could improve. Part of this improvement was building standards – something I brought over from pharma – which can be challenging in the market segment in which Radiometer operates. Selling a device and then connecting it to a hospital's internal systems is more complex than selling a box of medication, meaning that this standard-building was crucial. This is in line with the 'Kaizen' approach that Danaher, the mother company of Radiometer, utilises, which focuses on continuous improvement.

The second item on my agenda was linking our actions to a big-picture plan. We need all our team members to be detail-oriented without forgetting the main objectives (the Why?) and align cross-functionally on objective and execution.

The third point was building efficient cross-functional teams across safety, service, IT, marketing, and application. This is a highly diversified group and the connections between diverse cultures and background is a worthwhile focus point.

Finally, customer focus has been a touchstone throughout; when the customer talks, we listen. This is one of our core values.

What are the key topics on your agenda moving forward?

The key priority is positioning Radiometer as a healthcare partner in the GCC, especially in the UAE, building on the strong footprint we already have in countries like Qatar. Radiometer is very distinguished when it comes to partnering with healthcare providers in the hospitals, and we need to build on that to be a partner on the level of healthcare policymakers.

The second item on my agenda is building sustainable growth in South Africa, one of the biggest countries in my portfolio. The same goes for Egypt, which is currently experiencing many economic and cash flow challenges, yet has a very large population that deserves to have access to high-end diagnostic services in critical care cases.

Looking at Radiometer's portfolio, what are the gaps that it fills with its products and services?

Our products and solutions are diagnostic instruments for blood gas analysis, blood gas transcutaneous monitoring, and point of care (POC) immunoassay analysers, a variety of blood gas samplers, and POC IT solutions.

Arterial blood gas analysers (ABGs) measure blood gases, electrolytes, metabolites oximetry and can be used in several different departments within a hospital.

Transcutaneous monitors (TCMs) are a non-invasive and continuous blood gas monitoring system for critically ill patients and newborns in ICUs and NICUs.

The immunoassay analyser helps in accelerating patient flow and provides better triage time. This can measure key parameters in emergency departments like cardiac biomarkers, PCT, CRP, D-Dimer and β HCG.

Radiometer's POC IT is a solution that helps in improving patient care by connecting people, medical devices, and data.

Our value is "Whatever comes next, we make sure lives come first"

How would you characterise the attitude of governments in your region towards investments in medical diagnostics?

Awareness is still growing, and health economics has not yet been optimally introduced in the field of POC diagnostics. Education and partnerships with policymakers are critical.

This does not mean we are far away from progress, as policymakers in UAE and Qatar are highly interested in assessing the value of diagnostics (especially BG and POC IA specifically) not only in terms of price but also in the cost of avoided health expenditure if the right test is used at the right time.

Radiometer will continue its efforts around partnerships with healthcare providers towards offering a better health service for patients who need it. As I mentioned previously, life comes first. This is our purpose.

What policies could be put in place to improve the situation?

Despite all the efforts of policymakers, there is always room for improvement in terms of how key health providers in the UAE, Qatar, Oman and others value the point of care concept.

There remains a need for more education around the value of POC in the field of immunoassays. I would like to see key decision makers receive this education in the form of health economic studies on POC diagnostics versus conventional diagnostics for patient needs in critical care. However, I do see this point evolving in the Middle East.

I would think about creating a protocol of diagnostics required for critical cases, like ICU patients or emergency department patients. This protocol could be rolled out across big healthcare providers and a cross-country protocol would clearly help.

Finally, we need more digitalisation and a policy framework that supports connectivity between workflows and systems. This will bring significant benefits to both patients and healthcare providers.

How is the forward-thinking environment that exists in the GCC helping Radiometer progress with its operations?

This innovative mindset in this region helps us to challenge ourselves to enhance and customise our existing digital offering and find solutions. Security is a big concern across the Middle East, and we are constantly innovating to get better, even on a small-scale level.

Secondly, we are always thinking about new offerings, including creating a seamless smooth workflow in POC via our IT solutions.

Healthcare providers in the UAE are eager to adopt the artificial intelligence and robotics solutions that Radiometer has already implemented in Denmark, our country of origin, if it can improve the workflow and reduce the time and workload

What are the benefits for Radiometer of basing its MEA operations out of the UAE?

The UAE is the hub of the GCC - with the exception of KSA which is a separate entity- and if a solution works well here, that makes a good reference point for many other countries in the region.

We work to leverage experts within the GCC to provide education on how to implement successful POC systems.

How did COVID impact your business?

The situations pre- and post-COVID are somewhat different. During COVID, we were fortunate to be a critical care company and our business flourished, as we were eager to be the closest to our customers and to fulfil immediate patient needs despite all the challenges we faced, like others, in terms of supply. After COVID the market for blood gas has slowed down somewhat. The effect of inflation on production costs has been significant, and we needed to absorb it to keep the usual quality and speed in serving our patients whose lives always come first. Managing those challenges together with keeping the team motivated, and always reminding them of the “Why” and our values while they are overloaded with work, families and post-COVID impact in some cases, has been a challenge.

All in all, it had a very positive impact. COVID made healthcare regulators look more closely at the diagnostics sector and opened their eyes to the value that proper diagnostics can bring to patients.

What is your strategic objective over the next two to three years?

In a perfect world, I would like to transfer the success that Radiometer has had as a healthcare partner in GCC countries to the entire region. Countries like Egypt, Algeria, and Iraq have large populations that could benefit from Radiometer solutions. In terms of priority markets in Africa, South Africa will be my priority, and developing countries like Kenya and Nigeria will also be important. African people deserve to be served with high-quality diagnostics and need healthcare regulators and companies to offer them a high quality of life and ensure that every patient’s life in this region comes first.

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