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The region is primed for innovation, and Biologix is fully prepared to lead the change in delivering transformative solutions

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Zeina Sfeir Lahoud of Biologix, a Dubai-based firm that represents international pharma companies by bringing innovative drugs to market in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, highlights important recent developments for the company - including a groundbreaking "value management agreement" in the UAE - and her hopes for patient-centred growth moving forward.

Zeina last time you spoke to PharmaBoardroom was about two years ago. How has Biologix evolved over this period?

Even if Biologix has been in the Emirates for over 20 years, it was only in 2021 that we opened a marketing office in Dubai, so it is truly an exciting time for us here.

At Biologix our mission has remained the same; we are partnering with pharmaceutical companies to bring their innovative products to the Middle East and Northern Africa, and we currently operate in more than 17 countries in the Levant region, GCC, Northern Africa, as well Iraq.

We are known to be a regional platform that brings end-to-end solutions to biotech companies in the MENA region. These services can start at the pre-registration phase until the launch, with the objective of enhancing access to treatment in compliance with local, regional, and global guidelines and regulations.

It goes without saying that the patient remains our priority and at the core of what we do. Biologix has as an overarching goal to improve the healthcare outcomes of patients in the markets in which we operate. Patients are our number one priority. Biologix aims to improve access to life-changing treatments by bringing therapies to patients in the region, partnering with local health authorities and healthcare providers and offering patient support programs.

Which areas is Biologix currently focused on and how will this develop in the future as its innovative therapies branch out into even more new modalities such as cell and gene therapies?

We will still focus on the same therapeutic lines of rare diseases, onco-haematology, cardiology and immunology, but this is not set in stone. As mentioned earlier, we focus on innovation, so in the future, as more innovation enters areas such as gene therapy and personalised medicine, we will look into partnering with companies in these areas. Biologix focuses primarily on the four main channels just mentioned, as these are not only the fastest-growing therapeutic areas in our region, but we are truly experts in everything they entail.

As I always mention, innovation is what has made Biologix different and a pioneer throughout the years since its establishment in 2002 and this shall continue as we aim at remaining the preferred partner of companies wishing to introduce breakthrough products to the MENA region.

The MENA region is growing rapidly, as is the number of competitors with similar business models. How do you keep ahead of the game?

First and foremost, we enhance and adapt our organisation in view of the patients' needs, market demands, and the changes within the regulatory environment. We are extremely humble here and can take a step back, see the market from a bird's eye perspective, take notes, and adjust accordingly. This is not easy sometimes as you want to move quickly all the time, but this ability to readapt and take a bigger perspective is a must. This is important in an ever-changing Pharmaceuticals World and does not stop us from being agile when we do have to make decisions. Furthermore, areas such as ethics and compliance require us to look at how we are doing things especially since we are responsible for a business that concerns Partners, Distributors and the Medical Community

As I have already mentioned, we are present in the UAE since 2002 and we were the first company to offer such a platform in the Middle East. We are happy to see that our success has inspired other companies as well and we appreciate healthy competition.

At Biologix, we all adopt customer-centric approaches every day. We understand the importance of meeting and listening to customers to gain additional insights into the healthcare environment. This allows us to be proactive and agile. We are the partner of choice and must always be updating our knowledge.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a strange and painful period for most and a challenge in many ways. How has the market adjusted since?

The recovery that we have seen in the post-COVID period has been remarkable. Face-to-face interaction in conferences, congresses and scientific meetings enhanced the experience of knowledge sharing and we are back to the normalcy that we have been used to.

We have also noticed that expectations and regulations have evolved dynamically which meant that to be ahead of the game, we had to improve our efficiency of regulatory submissions and respond to urgent needs by setting up innovative market access programs and allowing rapid access to the market. It is obvious that the life cycle of innovation has been shortened compared to what it used to be 15 years ago. Today, with the drive for innovation, there is rapid competition once the drug hits the market as the window for deploying the assets is shorter. This is where we excel in creating more value for patients and partners.

Biologix is a company that offers end-to-end solutions for innovative therapies. Within this field, market access is crucial – what do you consider as success in this area for the UAE?

Success is making products available to patients when they need them thus serving our mission of having the patient at the core of what we do… When the need is significantly high at a national level, it becomes a priority for the country’s healthcare sector. Hence, it becomes the responsibility of Biologix to raise awareness about a disease and we measure our success in optimizing access to treatment.

A successful example occurred in July 2021 when we worked with one of our partners and the governmental authorities in the UAE to establish the first-ever “value management agreement”. It was such a success that today it is being used by the Ministry of Health and Prevention as a marker of how to set up market access programs for innovative products. At the time it was one of the most sophisticated market access programs in the middle east and northern Africa and took us nearly two years to completely set it up. This has considered a full array of stakeholders and had to clearly define which patients should be included in the program while determining the eligibility criteria.

Patient group identification is also key for setting up adequate market access programs and we believe the government can assist in this. Also, our own medical team is always at reach to assist in diagnosis education and disease awareness, with the government. We deliver patient support programs within certain therapeutic areas; Furthermore, one of the KPIs today is proper monitoring of the therapy administration and we mostly use third-party partners to do so.

What healthcare trends are you seeing as potential game-changers for the UAE market? What about the government’s strategy to move to mandatory health insurance and the increased importance of private insurance?

The role of private insurance has been growing over the years in the UAE healthcare sector. Now that it has become mandatory this implies that we would have to deal with additional stakeholders in the market including private insurance companies, pharmacies and healthcare providers.

This has a big weight in the region, especially in the UAE with such a large percentage of expats who use insurance to access their treatment and get the needed reimbursement & coverage.

I would like to highlight the level of complexity that this entails when working in Therapeutic areas such as Rare Diseases and Haematology and Oncology. We wish things could be faster and hopefully, this will be the case in the future. Nevertheless, we are working with private insurance companies currently in the field of cardiology, so a good first step.

You are representing pharma and biopharma firms in this region at a moment of heightened M&A activity and several corporate reshuffles. How do you mitigate risk and keep looking forward when there are no guarantees that today’s clients will also be tomorrow’s?

We will always position ourselves as the partners of choice for innovative companies and will differentiate ourselves through our services, professionalism and results-driven organization. There are a multitude of innovations every year, and that time has shown us that adaptability and agility are key as we are able to answer our partners' needs while riding the waves of change and complexities.

Sometimes Biologix pays the price of its success as we grow value to our partners to such an extent that they prefer to be present in the market, but our mission continues, and our model keeps evolving to ensure continuous success.

We offer end-to-end solutions for innovative companies with the idea of increasing their commercial success, but once we reach this level of success, partners in many cases will choose to go for it alone. We know this but always respect our mission to deliver therapies to patients in a timely manner.

For us, if the companies wish to take their assets back and continue their marketing, it means we have probably well-developed the asset to the point that is worthwhile for them to invest more resources!

How do you go about seeking new partners with promising assets and what characteristics are you looking for in these partners?

Our Business Development Team is dynamic and always excited about new and differentiated opportunities that can help patients live better and manage their diseases in the smoothest way possible. We target companies that have innovative products not directly operating in our region, and ideally that have more than one product to bring to market. We place great importance on earning the complete trust of our partners. When introducing their medicines, we prefer a staged launch across multiple countries. Rest assured, our approach is always flexible and tailored to suit specific needs and circumstances.

What role does the UAE play for Biologix in its mission of launching innovative products?

The UAE's healthcare system is focused on innovation and every market in the region follows what is happening here. Innovation is prevalent within all areas, from areas such as regulation and market access to IT. The UAE wants innovation here as soon as possible, which is good for us and good for our partners. So, in this sense, there is a perfect combination between the UAE and our mission.

We are nearly halfway through 2023; what would you like to achieve in the second half of the year and beyond?

As a company we want to continue to differentiate ourselves by continuing to utilise our specific business model and special approach., but the history of Biologix has always been about resilience and adaptation, so this will ensure we remain a partner for all. Furthermore, we bring a family atmosphere to everything we do despite our interactions with big pharma and people really appreciate this energy.

In terms of growth, we will continue to look for potential partners in line with targeting innovative therapies.

Internally, we are looking more and more towards technological advancement & innovation in our operations. Equally, we are focused on the development of our employees, so they are ready to face the competition set by our partners in the market. It is not easy sometimes, we are dealing with so many stakeholders; partners, distributors, and governments, so we must be wise enough to help everyone navigate the storm to bring life-changing theories to the patients. We have a responsibility towards the entire Healthcare community, which includes Patients, HCPs, regulators, Distributors, and Governmental authorities…

Our plans are centred around one core principle: prioritizing the patients. It is their well-being that drives our dedication to the industry in which we operate. Despite the potential challenges posed by the regions we serve, characterized by complex economic situations, we remain steadfast in our commitment. The region is primed for innovation, and Biologix is fully prepared to lead the change in delivering transformative solutions. Together, let us embark on a journey where making a positive difference in the lives of others becomes the norm, leaving an enduring impact.

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