Joe Henein – President & CEO, Newbridge Pharmaceuticals



The business model offered by NewBridge is becoming more relevant and a mainstay in the industry across emerging markets, not just MENA

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NewBridge Pharmaceuticals' Joe Henein describes how his MENA-focused specialty innovative biopharma distributor has developed over the last 13 years to become a market leader; looks at some of the key trends shaping the market in his region; and reinforces his commitment to bridging the gap and delivering therapies to patients who need them via partnerships with global pharma, governments, and healthcare communities.

As the president and CEO, how would you define the niche in which NewBridge operates?

Our focus is specialty innovative biopharmaceuticals for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. As the name suggests, NewBridge – where “New” stands for innovation and our expertise in partnering with global biopharma, while “Bridge” stands for creating the platform and capabilities to bridge the access gap and deliver new innovative therapeutics that address unmet medical needs in the region. By doing so, we fulfil our mission of accessing innovation, providing physicians with new treatment modalities, serving patients either through a better quality of life or curing them with treatments we can offer.

How did you take the decision to create the company?

My beginnings were in Big Pharma in a journey lasted for 25 years, took me from Middle East to Europe, USA and back. I basically came from the “kitchen” as they say and assumed many different roles across industry functions and responsibilities with increasing dimensions and complexities. My last 2 roles in Big Pharma were Global VP and Commercial Chair Infectious Diseases at Wyeth Global HQ in USA, then moved to Dubai to assume role of Regional VP and Managing Director for Wyeth MENA, and eventually leaving Big Pharma when Pfizer acquired Wyeth Pharmaceuticals end of 2009.

The decision to move ahead with NewBridge stemmed from two pivots; my learnings in global business seeing that many innovations started to come from smaller and mid-size biotech companies that are not represented here in MENA, and the second pivot was the lack of a representation Pan-MENA to build these new innovations across all countries of the region.

These mid-sized biotech companies focused mostly on selected regions to operate in it themselves but outsource others – mostly in emerging markets – to a partner capable of building brands, developing thought leaders, accessing patients, and creating desired value. The other side of the same white space I saw was the limited Pan-MENA operators who can build this capability for multiple innovative therapeutics across multiple geographies. This has led me to position the company as a platform to partner with multiple biopharma and serve them as a one-stop solution across this expanded footprint of MENA countries, hence accessing a massive population in need of specialty therapeutic innovations.

We established the company by attracting global pharma talents who are well-poised to hit the ground running and build competitive highly specialized brands. With steady growth in the early years, few other companies were also created to follow suit within the same business model, however, NewBridge as pioneers of this model was successfully able to scale up to a differentiated level.

From the start we crafted a clear vision and purpose, and knew that we would not be in the field of manufacturing or generics, but rather only focus on licencing innovative specialty therapeutics that we bridge from west to east. Furthermore, we were investor-based and very targeted in the therapeutic areas we cover, immunology, oncology, neuroscience metabolic and rare diseases.

The company has been operating for 13 years now. How has what you offer shifted over the years?

There are many tectonic shifts happening in the pharma world we live in today as well as in our region. MENA region became marred with many geopolitical, economic, and sanctions challenges. It is a complex region to access to begin with and now even more so. I remember in my former life there was not a country in MENA we couldn't sell to, this is a statement we can't claim today.

On the global scene also, we see tailwinds for global pharma, with another big round of exclusivity losses soon approaching, and in particular the USA market, where companies still enjoyed free pricing, now being confronted with the Inflation Reduction Act- IRA- posing formidable challenges to the industry and affecting prices, operations, R&D spending, footprint and more.

On the brighter side, we see many breaking grounds and promising innovations that represent a massive leap forward in medicines that address serious and challenging diseases, in the field of large protein-based molecules, biotechnology, rare diseases therapies, personalized and gene therapy, targeted oncology therapies and vaccines – all of which are great advancements in medicines however many come at a price that could be difficult for some emerging markets to swallow.

As a result of all the above shifts, many of the pharma companies started to be selective on where geographically they must be present, and where else they can depend solely on reliable partners. We started to witness a rationalization of their presence contrary to the global footprint mandates they once believed in, more visible in emerging markets and MENA is no exception.

So, in a nutshell, 13 years ago many were sceptical about the future of our business model. However today, in part because of these shifts and evolving dynamics, I can confidently say that the business model offered by NewBridge is becoming more relevant and a mainstay in the industry across emerging markets, not just MENA.

How did you convince investors to pursue NewBridge as an opportunity?

Since day one, I knew that the road to building this enterprise would be long, and arduous, but at the same time, I was also convinced that there is a need for a one-stop solution platform like NewBridge in MENA, especially if it offers high-end regional expertise, quality and excellence in services to build brands with full transparency in operations.

I made this conviction visible and understandable to my shareholders, and it became contagious to all the teams joining in. Shareholders also entrusted in me with my long history and successful track record hence were very supportive. They are investors mostly in the same field thus familiar with the space and cognisant of what it takes to be successful in building a pharma company from scratch.

Strong financial backing from investors is critical for companies in this model. We must continually invest in infrastructures, people, and processes to scale up as you increase your partnerships and build brands in MENA from ground zero, competing with the bigger and more resourceful competitive sets.

Where does the company stand today in terms of size and market positioning?

By the end of this December will have around north of 200 people and a few offices in the region. We represent many blue-chip companies and multiple innovative global blockbuster brands. We are one of the leading companies in our business model if we are not the leaders today. We represent our partners across the whole region with their most recent innovative therapies. Our partnership and working relationship with them are very strong and very close ensuring we are always aligned in addressing the patient journey in need.

The most critical and difficult part of this success is the ability to build a strong reputation in the marketplace and among the partners. Referrals and word of mouth are very powerful tools but do not come easily or quickly. One part of our model is the consistency in delivering the services that your partner demands, and the other part, is to have a patient-centric focus in what we do, as we deliver innovation that enhances patients' journey, serves them and may save their lives too. That is what counts at the end of the day.

Pricing is a key step in market access. How do you solve this riddle in the region when dealing with such varying economic situations in each nation?

When it comes to pricing, all countries in MENA have a very well-defined pricing regulation that NewBridge and its partners abide by in our file submissions. However, it is the final decision of the partner we service to accept or reject the prices offered and, in rare instances, we must submit further rationale that governments need to learn more about the innovation we submit and how it helps the patients in their journey with the outcomes desired. Well-differentiated innovative

therapies usually secure approval of prices requested and faster access to the patients.

This movement towards management agreements for innovative therapies is a global trend. How will this impact the structure of how you operate?

As you said it is a global trend that our partners are fully aware of and MENA is no different. MENA countries are not uniform in their health systems, on the contrary quite different, hence it is very well understood that a tailored partnership with authorities is key to provide creative access schemes for innovative therapies to reach patients soonest possible. Some governments will not afford it and others will create the space to embrace it. We work closely with our partners to ensure we deliver on these negotiated schemes to destined countries.

You mentioned COVID, what were the major lessons learned from the pandemic in the region?

COVID shed a critical emphasis on how access to innovative medicines saves lives across the region, and understandably the COVID vaccines had blanket coverage in many of our countries. This created the awareness at the authorities' level to appreciate access to new technologies, a model to be carefully studied and replicated in other disease areas critical to many patients, but not necessarily reaching global existential threat level.

Another emphasis was highlighted on the supply chain and how the disruption in global supply can lead to massive shortages and delays for critical commodities with serious consequences on the population. Thankfully supply is back now but more expensive.

But I think one of the most crucial lessons is that we became more appreciative of the science of things, and in our field, it meant more recognition that only science and technology will save us in the next epidemic round.

What plans do you have at NewBridge to expand and grow in the future?

We continue our mission to be the conduit of new therapies and focus on meeting some of the unmet medical needs of the region. NewBridge is looking to expand into new technologies in genomics or new treatment modalities the likes of, Crisper technologies, Gene therapy, etc.

We may also be expanding geographically, and we are discussing possible moves into South Africa and selected Sub-Saharan African Countries. I also see a major trend that the business model of NewBridge, as a one-stop solution partner for an entire region, will become the norm within the global emerging markets space. More and more global companies are becoming more selective in their geographical footprint, which may trigger some M&A activities within these business models to fulfil this growing trend.

Will going public be beneficial to getting this funding?

This is always the USD 60 million question, which is hard to answer, but it is definitely an option if we like to raise major funding from the public market, should we target bigger expansion plans for future growth. It is a relatively long journey and demands large preparation and milestones that have to be met before embarking on this destiny.

A big part of growth is skill development, so which competencies do you believe are key to remaining such a strong partner?

I think it all pivots around 3 main areas: Teams, Processes and Values.

First off, the company has the leadership qualities and expertise to attract serious partners and engage in serious partnerships. We are also meticulous in the hiring process and offer key development programs as we upskill our team. Many of them have been with the company since early start and share the same passion and purpose we aim at. We ensure a high level of engagement and an enriching positive culture to attract and retain talents key to our partners for their brand success. Our team grew to match our growing partners and equally, the level of sophistication within the organization paralleled this growth.

We managed to learn from our partners in the journey and created robust processes and systems in place to mimic multinationals albeit on a smaller scale. Likewise, our digital capabilities and reach have advanced in areas of communication, marketing, and compliance.

The NewBridge team strongly subscribes to our values, beliefs and ethics codes. We are very transparent in our engagement with partners which induces trust and confidence in them. We deliver what we promise and achieve the results they expect from us. I always strive to make our partners feel we are more of an extension to them and resemble in a way their own affiliate in

MENA.

A final message?

We built a company that became a market leader in its business models. I look back to the last 13 years when I started with NewBridge, and I feel very proud of what we have achieved and what still can be done moving forward. Specializing in accessing and providing innovative therapeutics to the patients of MENA countries trying to alleviate their pain and suffering has been the mother of all missions.

Many unmet needs and market gaps still exist today, but experts like NewBridge are a reliable and trusted partner of choice to help bridge these gaps, and partner with global pharma to deliver their innovative therapies to the region. We, in turn, work with government and healthcare communities to bring this innovation to the patients in the region soonest we can, and that is the core of what we stand for.

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