Amine Sekhri – Country Director, AstraZeneca Morocco



Our foremost priority is to contribute significantly to Morocco's vision of implementing universal healthcare coverage and becoming a healthcare hub for the region

05.10.2023

Tags: Morocco, AstraZeneca, Access, Strategy, Innovation

A highly experienced stalwart of the North African pharma industry, Amine Sekhri today heads up AstraZeneca's operations in Morocco. In his latest PharmaBoardroom conversation, Sekhri shares his delight at the positive healthcare transformations taking place across Morocco and Africa, gives his insight into the market access landscape for AstraZeneca's most innovative new therapies, and foregrounds the importance of a robust team to the affiliate's continued success.

Can you talk us through why you moved back to Morocco after working for many years across other parts of Africa and what your mission was when taking up this role?

I've had the privilege of working in some African markets, and I've personally witnessed the remarkable positive transformations taking place across the continent. It's truly gratifying for me to return to Morocco after several years abroad. The Moroccan market is undergoing significant changes, evolving towards a dynamic and modern healthcare system. I'm delighted to lead the affiliate of a company that has the potential to be a game-changer, not only for the healthcare ecosystem but also for local patients.

AstraZeneca displays a robust and diverse pipeline of products. My primary objective is to introduce these innovative products to the country. Expanding our portfolio is essential, but it's equally crucial that we secure its access to patients, which lies at the very heart of our company's mission. The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us the importance of establishing a sustainable

healthcare system and collaborating with relevant stakeholders to build a long-term perspective. Contributing to building this sustainable healthcare environment is also one of our primary focus areas.

Furthermore, we aspire to create a resilient organization comprising talented individuals who can effectively lead the company well into the future. Our commitment to nurturing future leadership is a fundamental part of our vision.

What is the overall footprint of AstraZeneca in Morocco?

AstraZeneca has established a significant presence in Morocco over the past 15 years. We have a direct presence in the country and collaborate closely with our partners and distributors. Currently, we have approximately 60 dedicated employees working to make our mission a reality.

While our portfolio in Morocco is diverse, our commitment is to expand it further. Our goal is to be the leading company in each therapeutic area we operate in, through products that are well positioned in the international treatment guidelines.

Currently, we offer innovative therapies across various domains, including respiratory diseases such as asthma, diabetes management, and cardiovascular diseases, which encompass conditions like heart failure and hypertension. Looking ahead, we anticipate that oncology will serve as a key catalyst for our growth, with a comprehensive range of offerings covering major cancer types: breast, lung, prostate, ovarian cancer, among others. Additionally, our recent acquisition of Alexion has enabled us to enter the field of rare diseases, addressing the unmet medical needs of patients in Morocco.

Overall, Morocco plays a pivotal role in the Near East & Maghreb region (NEMAG), and we are steadily gaining significance in MEA and globally within AstraZeneca.

How are you preparing as a company to bring in these new ranges of products in areas such as oncology?

As we prepare to bring a new range of products, particularly in the field of oncology, one of the main challenges we anticipate is ensuring effective market access. A critical starting point in this journey is the registration of these products. Our goal is to streamline and optimize the registration timelines and reimbursement process, ultimately offering patients access to the most advanced

and innovative therapies available.

While this is can be challenging, Morocco presents a wealth of opportunities, especially given the recent expansion efforts led by H.M The King to introduce universal healthcare for all Moroccans. This initiative has gained a widespread support, and it revolves around two fundamental principles: equitable access and the provision of high-quality healthcare services. AstraZeneca aligns perfectly with this vision, as we aim to make our world-class products accessible and affordable.

Furthermore, we see a positive trend in Morocco's healthcare infrastructure, both public and private. There has also a been remarkable progress in the universities that feed system with medical professionals. These key developments combined will be transforming Morocco into a leading healthcare system where patients can benefit immensely.

Market access for innovative therapies is a concern, especially when nations look to drive down prices. How do you deal with this challenge?

When it comes to market access for innovative therapies, it's important that we look at it beyond pricing alone. It's about striking the right balance between affordability and ensuring these therapies are readily available to patients who need them. Addressing this challenge involves a multi-faceted approach, and we actively engage in discussions with the Ministry of Health and fellow pharmaceutical companies to explore sustainable solutions and innovative mechanisms. This requires efforts from all parties including new policies that facilitate the implementation of those access solutions. In this regard, we have partnered with University EuroMed of Fes to launch an academic program around Health Technology Assessment to build local competencies in this important area.

As a company, we believe in a more holistic approach on access, covering the entire patient journey. For instance, our efforts include a strong focus on screening, early diagnosis, preventive measures, and personalized medicine to ensure that the right therapies are administered to the right patients, thereby enhancing treatment efficacy. We are actively involved in developing diagnosis platforms, especially in areas like oncology. Additionally, we harness the power of innovative AI techniques for the cancer screening of patients or patient monitoring.

This approach aligns with our commitment to improving patient care. It helps improve patient outcomes and contribute to cost-savings, while ensuring access to more advanced and innovative treatments for those in need.

Many nations have specific healthcare agendas around certain diseases. Is this the case in Morocco?

In Morocco, we are currently witnessing the epidemiological transition, and the government has placed its priorities with a strong focus on non-communicable diseases, particularly cardiovascular diseases, cancer, and diabetes. Morocco has made substantial investments in healthcare infrastructure, to enhance the capabilities of its medical workforce and setup national programs in those areas.

The key elements of all efforts to improve healthcare outcomes and reduce healthcare costs lies in prevention and early disease detection. This underscores the importance of active involvement from all stakeholders, which can be achieved through partnerships and collaboration. AstraZeneca is actively engaged in these endeavours, collaborating with esteemed partners and organizations like the Foundation Lalla Salma and the scientific community. Our initiatives, such as ‘Cancer Care for Africa,’ reflect our commitment to these partnerships and our dedication to contributing to the broader healthcare objectives in Morocco.

Sustainability is a concept AstraZeneca is very much driving. How do you approach this in your Morocco operations?

AstraZeneca plays a leading role in terms of sustainability globally not just in the pharmaceutical sector. It is a strong part of our culture as a company, and in Morocco we have been able to reinforce this internally and externally with our stakeholders. It is based around three core pillars.

Firstly, the interaction between the environment and our operations in the long and short term. In Morocco we were the first company with a full hybrid fleet of vehicles for staff and we are undergoing other initiatives aiming at environmental conservation such as waste management, and a reduced carbon output. We are constantly challenging and improving our day-to-day operations with the environment in mind. Secondly, access to patients so we can adhere to our company mission to deliver innovative therapies to as many patients as possible. When we launch treatments, we are aiming to help the overall community and make sure affordability for patients remains our priority.

Thirdly, we act in an ethical and compliant manner that meets local and international standards of good practice. As member of the local pharmaceutical association, AstraZeneca is actively engaged

in promoting good practices and shaping policies so the nation can be recognized globally as an attractive place to do business.

A big part of a strong organisation is a driven workforce. How crucial are employees to the success of AstraZeneca Morocco?

People represent the foundation of our strategy for our operations in Morocco. To this end, we are making considerable investments in attracting, developing, and retaining our staff. This includes high level trainings, development programs and exposure, including opportunities for them to gain insights by working abroad and understanding how we operate in different markets. This knowledge transfer is instrumental in developing our local competencies and nurturing our team. One initiative we're particularly proud of, launched just this year, is V-Reps program. especially dedicated for disabled staff members. It has garnered substantial success thus far and reflects our strong commitment to fostering an inclusive work environment.

Our dedication to create a positive environment for our employees has been recognized externally. We were honoured to receive the 'Best Place to Work in Morocco' award last year, and we were also recognized as the 'Best Place to Work for Women'.

What is at the top of your priority list as you look to the future?

As we look ahead to the future, our foremost priority is to contribute significantly to Morocco's vision of implementing universal healthcare coverage and becoming a healthcare hub for the region. We firmly believe in the immense potential that Morocco holds, and we are fully dedicated to playing our part in the transformation of the national healthcare ecosystem.

Our primary goal is to facilitate greater access to our innovative therapies, ensuring that an increasing number of Moroccan patients can benefit from the life-changing products that AstraZeneca offers. We are committed to achieving this objective through effective collaboration with our various healthcare partners. This commitment is a source of immense pride for our company.

See more interviews