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GSK is actively collaborating with the [Saudi] government to enhance awareness and knowledge surrounding adult vaccinations, recognizing the importance of lifelong immunization

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Farrukh Rehan outlines how GSK Saudi Arabia is actively collaborating with the Saudi government to align its initiatives with Vision 2030 and support national healthcare goals. Through strategic partnerships and MoUs, the company ensures the seamless integration of its innovations into the healthcare system, contributing to improved patient access and outcomes. Rehan expresses his excitement at the potential impact of upcoming oncology launches for Saudi patients and lays out how his leadership style - characterized by a proactive approach to addressing challenges and fostering a culture of empowerment and innovation - is leading to significant improvements in the organization's agility and performance.

Could you provide an overview of your career journey?

My journey began in Canada, where I started working in the industry with a small specialty pharma company. After gaining valuable experience there, I moved to Dubai in 2010 and joined Novartis, where I held a leadership position as head of primary care for the Middle East. This role served as a good introduction to the dynamics of the Middle East region and its healthcare landscape.

Following my tenure in Dubai, I transitioned to Novartis Switzerland, where I served in a regional role as head of the respiratory franchise for Central and Eastern Europe. This opportunity allowed me to further expand my understanding of different healthcare systems and market dynamics

across various countries in Europe.

Subsequently, I was recruited to lead Roche in Pakistan as Managing Director and General Manager. During my time there, I focused on improving access to specialty and oncology medicines, which was a significant challenge given the economic conditions of the country. Through strategic partnerships and access initiatives, we were able to make these medicines more accessible to a larger population, which was personally very gratifying.

In 2021, I transitioned to my current role as Vice President and General Manager for GSK in Saudi Arabia. Here, my focus has been on driving growth and impact while fostering a positive organizational culture. I strongly believe in empowering people and creating an environment where they feel motivated to bring their best selves to work.

Ultimately, my career journey has been characterized by a commitment to making a positive impact in the pharmaceutical industry, whether it’s improving access to medicines or driving organizational growth and transformation. My experiences in different countries and roles have shaped my perspective and approach to leadership, with a strong emphasis on people and culture.

Three years ago, when you began your role in Saudi Arabia, what was your initial impression of GSK Saudi and how has it evolved since then?

When I first arrived at GSK Saudi, I encountered a company with a rich history spanning five decades in Saudi Arabia. It had built a strong legacy and was the first multinational company to establish a manufacturing plant in the kingdom in the early 1990s. Despite this, I observed that employees were burdened by bureaucratic processes and inefficiencies, hindering their ability to innovate and make swift decisions. Recognizing this, I engaged with employees directly, seeking their input on the challenges they faced. This led to valuable insights, with many expressing a desire for streamlined processes and faster decision-making.

To address these issues, we launched various initiatives, including town hall meetings and team-led projects aimed at simplifying processes and fostering innovation. Over time, we witnessed significant improvements, with cumbersome processes reduced and a culture of empowerment and collaboration fostered within the organization. Today, GSK Saudi is characterized by a more agile and innovative workforce, driven by a shared commitment to achieving bold goals in alignment with Vision 2030.

Our interaction with the government lacked effectiveness from an external perspective. In order to rectify this situation, we made the decision to actively seek out opportunities for collaboration. As a result, we have successfully entered into several MoUs with both the Ministry of Health and the Public Health Authority.

How has this more empowered and ambitious culture translated into strong performance in terms of market share and patient access to GSK medicines?

Over the past three years, GSK Saudi has undergone a remarkable transformation, becoming the fastest-growing pharmaceutical company in the Kingdom. The culture of empowerment and innovation at GSK Saudi, where every employee is encouraged to think boldly and creatively, has contributed to the company's recognition as a Top Employer in three consecutive years (2021, 2022, 2023). This shift has enabled us to double our top line in just two years and establish ourselves as one of the top-performing entities within GSK's emerging markets portfolio.

Furthermore, our strategic partnerships with the Saudi government have facilitated the prioritization of our country for all GSK product launches, including critical vaccines and oncology treatments. As a result, we've been able to swiftly introduce cutting-edge medical solutions to the Saudi market, addressing the evolving healthcare needs of the population and enhancing access to essential medicines.

For example, GSK intends to launch its oncology portfolio in Fall 2024, and Saudi Arabia will be one of the initial markets for adult vaccines such as those for shingles, and RSV. Being among the first 20 countries to launch this RSV vaccine demonstrates Saudi Arabia's significance in GSK's global strategy. This success story underscores the power of collaborative leadership and the tangible impact it can have on both business performance and patient outcomes.

The impressive performance you've outlined relies on a system capable of integrating these new products effectively. Could you elaborate on how GSK is collaborating with the government to ensure seamless integration of these innovations into the healthcare system?

I'm continually struck by the bold vision and ambition of the Saudi healthcare system, particularly under the transformative umbrella of Vision 2030. The Ministry of Health, in alignment with this vision, is undergoing substantial reforms focused on fostering thriving societies, with an emphasis

on enhancing access to high-quality healthcare and disease prevention.

Prevention is at the heart of GSK's approach. Populations are ageing, chronic diseases are taking a greater toll than ever before, and infectious diseases are still spreading. All of this is creating unsustainable pressure on health systems and economies.

Here, GSK Saudi plays a pivotal role with Ministry of Health, especially in the realm of vaccination. Approximately 60 percent of the Saudi national immunization program's vaccines are provided by GSK, covering around 500,000 newborns annually. This underscores our significant responsibility and pride in contributing to public health initiatives. Furthermore, our expansion into the adult vaccine space aligns with the government's forward-thinking approach to addressing diseases such as shingles and RSV in older populations. As a trusted partner, GSK is committed to supporting these initiatives and ensuring the seamless integration of our innovations into the broader healthcare landscape.

What is the level of vaccine scepticism in Saudi Arabia, and how is GSK working with the Saudi government to combat misinformation?

It's an important topic. Unfortunately, misinformation and scepticism around vaccinations persist in some parts of the world, impeding crucial public health efforts. However, I must commend Saudi Arabia for its exemplary national immunization program, which rivals global standards. The government's proactive measures, coupled with high levels of public trust, have facilitated widespread adherence to vaccination guidelines. Notably, stringent regulations, such as mandatory vaccination for school enrolment, reinforce compliance.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia's remarkable handling of the COVID-19 pandemic stands as a testament to its healthcare system's resilience and efficacy. From robust digital solutions to widespread PCR testing, vaccine distribution, the nation exemplified best practices in pandemic management. Consequently, public attitudes toward vaccination remain generally positive, albeit with occasional hesitancy or fatigue, particularly among adults.

Addressing this, GSK is actively collaborating with the government to enhance awareness and knowledge surrounding adult vaccinations, recognizing the importance of lifelong immunization. Additionally, beyond vaccination, Saudi Arabia is pioneering initiatives in genomic research, laying the foundation for targeted oncology treatments and advancing preventive healthcare on multiple fronts.

As GSK is headquartered in the UK, a world leader in genomic healthcare and research, does your company have a role to play in boosting Saudi Arabia's efforts in this field?

There's tremendous potential for cross-pollination of knowledge and expertise in this area between the UK and Saudi Arabia, including through GSK. Currently, a team of eight top GSK R&D scientists specializing in oncology and genomics are engaging with officials from the Ministry of Health and leading research institutes in Saudi Arabia. This underscores both GSK's commitment to the region and Saudi Arabia's openness to innovative partnerships. The exchange of insights and data could pave the way for mutually beneficial collaborations, particularly in tailoring oncology therapies to the specific genetic profiles of Saudi and Middle Eastern populations. As the healthcare landscape evolves towards targeted therapies, leveraging precise genetic information holds promise for enhancing healthcare outcomes in Saudi Arabia and beyond.

Given GSK's pioneering role as the first multinational pharmaceutical company to establish manufacturing operations in Saudi Arabia in 1992, how much of your portfolio is produced in the kingdom today, and how does this factor into your engagements with the government?

We take immense pride in our longstanding commitment to Saudi Arabia, with approximately 80 percent of all products available in the country originating from our manufacturing facility at various stages of production. This includes vaccines and pharmaceuticals, showcasing our substantial contribution to the local healthcare landscape. Our facility not only ensures a reliable supply of essential medicines but also facilitates technology transfer, further enhancing Saudi Arabia's healthcare capabilities.

We regularly emphasize this accomplishment in our engagements with the government, underscoring our ongoing investment and dedication to the nation's healthcare infrastructure. Additionally, our focus extends beyond manufacturing to the development of Saudi talent, particularly empowering women in the workforce. We have implemented various programs aimed at nurturing Saudi pharmacists and engineers, fostering their leadership skills, and providing opportunities for advancement. Notably, our organization has witnessed an impressive transformation in women's leadership roles, with Saudi women comprising 30 percent of our commercial arm. This progress is further exemplified by the fact that in 2023, half of our new hires were women. Our commitment to women's empowerment extends beyond mere gestures, with

tangible initiatives such as mentorship programs and flexible maternity leave policies aimed at ensuring their professional growth and success.

With the exciting prospect of launching new oncology products in Saudi Arabia, how well-prepared is the country to absorb these innovations in terms of regulatory processes, payer systems, and overall readiness?

Saudi Arabia demonstrates a commendable commitment to innovation and modernization, particularly in healthcare. The regulatory environment, spearheaded by the Saudi FDA's robust processes, is conducive to the introduction of new medicines and vaccines. Notably, government agencies exhibit proactive support, as evidenced by requests to expedite the availability of certain oncology products. However, while regulatory frameworks are in place, the process of ensuring widespread access to these innovations may encounter delays. Nonetheless, initiatives are underway to streamline access frameworks, reflecting the government's dedication to advancing healthcare innovation for the benefit of the Saudi population.

Looking ahead, what are your aspirations and goals for GSK in Saudi Arabia in the next few years, and what legacy do you hope to leave for the company and the country?

Leading GSK in Saudi Arabia during this transformative period is a privilege, and I see tremendous potential for growth and impact. My aspirations revolve around three key pillars. Firstly, I aim to help establish adult vaccination as a standard practice in Saudi Arabia, similar to paediatric vaccination, thereby contributing to the government's vision of extending the population's lifespan and promoting preventive healthcare.

Secondly, I am passionate about launching and ensuring access to our full oncology portfolio in Saudi Arabia, as oncology patients are in critical need of support and treatment options.

Lastly, I am deeply committed to fostering a positive and empowering internal culture within GSK Saudi Arabia, where employees are empowered, developed, and thrive. This includes nurturing Saudi talent and empowering women to take on leadership roles.

Overall, I envision GSK Saudi Arabia as a strong partner to the government in achieving its healthcare goals and creating a thriving, vibrant society as outlined in Vision 2030. Additionally, I aspire for GSK to be recognized as a key contributor to improving the lives of people in Saudi Arabia through innovative healthcare solutions and impactful partnerships with the government.

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