Roula Youssef Halabi – SVP Global Fertility Services, CooperSurgical Fertility Solutions



I anticipate continued progress and openness in the region, facilitated by ongoing awareness campaigns and initiatives aimed at breaking down taboos surrounding reproductive health

28.05.2024

Tags: Middle East & Africa, UAE, CooperSurgical

Roula Youssef Halabi, SVP Global Fertility Services, discusses her six-year journey at CooperSurgical, establishing a footprint in the Middle East, overcoming cultural biases as a female executive and the shift that has led GCC countries to increasingly recognize the importance of women's health. She also speaks about the need for regulatory reforms to facilitate the adoption of digital technologies in a region where certain products requiring data hosting or online components conflict with local regulatory requirements.

Could you start by introducing yourself to our audience?

I have over 25 years of experience in the healthcare sector. My entire career has been dedicated to women’s health, babies, and families. Initially trained as a nurse midwife, I later pursued my MBA in the United States. For the past 15 years, I have been deeply involved in the field of fertility. My journey has provided me with a diverse perspective, having worked in various roles spanning from patient care to clinic management to supplier relations. Presently, and for six years now, I serve as part of the team at CooperSurgical, a company dedicated to the well-being of women, babies, and families, aligning perfectly with my passion and expertise.

Can you shed some light on CooperSurgical's operations in the region, particularly in the Middle East?

I have been in UAE for ten years and when I joined CooperSurgical six years ago, I embarked on the mission of establishing our presence in the Middle East, where previously we had no physical footprint. Headquartered in the United States, with international operations based in Denmark, CooperSurgical recognized the strategic importance of the Middle East, especially concerning women's health and fertility. My role involved setting up our regional office from scratch, located in Dubai Healthcare City. Over the years, we have built a robust team managing operations across 13 countries in the Middle East, all facilitated through channel partners who serve as our distributors in the region.

About two and a half years into my tenure, I was appointed as the VP for Europe, Middle East, and Africa, while continuing to operate out of Dubai. Unlike our direct business model in Europe, our operations in the Middle East rely entirely on channel partners due to logistical challenges such as shipping and clearance. Despite the time zone differences, I manage global operations from Dubai, leveraging its strategic location as a hub with excellent connectivity to various parts of the world.

CooperSurgical, a division of Cooper Companies listed on the Nasdaq Stock Exchange, has three pillars: reproductive care, fertility and birth, and women's health. Specifically, in the fertility sector, we provide a comprehensive range of consumables, equipment, and services for Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) procedures like IVF treatments. My responsibilities include overseeing fertility services such as genetic testing, gamete donation, and digital solutions, alongside managing strategic accounts globally.

While certain services may not be promoted in the Middle East due to cultural sensitivities, our focus remains on delivering cutting-edge solutions and advocating for regulatory changes to facilitate the adoption of digital technologies in the region. In addition to the challenges posed by data hosting in the GCC area, digital products face particular hurdles. Strict requirements around cloud-based technologies can hinder the entry of innovative solutions into these markets. Our regional medtech industry association Mecomed is actively advocating for more flexibility in these regulations to ensure that the region does not miss out on opportunities. With even traditional equipment now incorporating digital components, regulatory changes must keep pace with technological advancements. Abu Dhabi's new vision on AI underscores the region's aspirations for excellence, highlighting the need for regulatory reforms to facilitate greater penetration of digital solutions in the healthcare sector.

As we observe Fertility Awareness Week, symbolized by the colour orange, our team is dedicated to raising awareness about fertility-related issues and supporting individuals and families on their reproductive journeys.

Infertility seems to be a growing concern not only in Dubai and the GCC countries but also globally. How serious do you perceive this situation to be?

Infertility is a significant issue that transcends geographical boundaries. According to recent data from the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately one out of every six individuals worldwide will encounter fertility challenges at some point in their lives. This ratio, which was comparatively lower in the past, highlights the escalating prevalence of infertility on a global scale.

Various factors contribute to the rising incidence of infertility, including lifestyle choices, environmental pollution, and cultural shifts. Particularly noteworthy is the trend of delayed conception, primarily driven by factors such as advancing maternal age and societal emphasis on career development before starting a family. This delay often results in diminished egg quality, underscoring the biological realities that individuals face.

Moreover, there remains a cultural stigma surrounding discussions of male infertility in certain regions, including the GCC countries. Despite evidence from the WHO indicating that male infertility contributes equally to conception challenges, societal perceptions often place undue emphasis on female factors alone. This imbalance in awareness perpetuates misconceptions and inhibits comprehensive treatment approaches.

Furthermore, the prevalence of genetic disorders, particularly in the GCC region, adds a unique dimension to fertility treatment dynamics. Couples may opt for assisted reproductive technologies not solely due to infertility but also as a preventive measure against transmitting genetic abnormalities to offspring. Consequently, genetic testing and interventions, such as in vitro fertilization (IVF), become integral components of family planning strategies, leading to increased demand for fertility services in these regions.

It is essential to note that disparities in IVF treatment rates among countries reflect differences in healthcare accessibility and reimbursement policies rather than inherent variations in infertility prevalence. Countries with higher reimbursement schemes tend to witness greater utilization of fertility treatments, highlighting the pivotal role of healthcare infrastructure in addressing infertility challenges.

How challenging has it been for your company to introduce its products to the market, particularly in conservative contexts?

Overall, the reception of our products in the market has been positive, with our partners showing a keen interest in adopting cutting-edge technologies, including those offered by CooperSurgical. However, challenges arise when certain products necessitate data hosting or online components that may conflict with local regulatory requirements. For instance, in cases where advanced maternal age or other factors necessitate egg donation, cultural and religious considerations in some regions limit the implementation of such programs. This represents a significant constraint rather than a reluctance to embrace innovation.

Despite these challenges, our focus remains on enhancing our product portfolio through ongoing research and development efforts. We actively collaborate with key opinion leaders (KOLs) to ensure that our products meet the evolving needs of healthcare professionals and patients alike. Moreover, we prioritize sustainability initiatives and are committed to raising awareness about reproductive health issues, including the importance of fertility preservation.

Furthermore, our company places a strong emphasis on inclusivity and diversity, both within our workforce and in the broader community. We believe in providing equal opportunities for all individuals, irrespective of gender, sexual orientation, or minority status. By embodying these principles and fostering a culture of inclusivity, we aim to create a more supportive and understanding environment for all stakeholders involved in reproductive healthcare.

Over your six years at CooperSurgical, you have played a pivotal role in establishing the Middle East office. How have you observed mentalities evolving in this region, particularly regarding reproductive health, and what changes do you foresee moving forward?

When I first arrived six years ago, navigating the landscape was certainly more challenging than it is today. As a female executive, I encountered certain hurdles, such as cultural expectations and biases, which required me to adapt my approach, even in simple matters like attire for meetings. However, I havewitnessed a significant transformation in societal attitudes towards women’s empowerment and gender equality, particularly in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Initiatives like allowing women to drive in Saudi Arabia exemplify this shift towards greater inclusivity and

opportunity.

Despite these positive changes, biases and misconceptions still persist, as evidenced by instances where individuals preferred to escalate issues assuming a male counterpart would handle them more effectively. However, I remain steadfast in my belief that confidence and perseverance are essential in overcoming such challenges and effecting meaningful change.

Looking ahead, I anticipate continued progress and openness in the region, facilitated by ongoing awareness campaigns and initiatives aimed at breaking down taboos surrounding reproductive health. For example, we actively promote social freezing, which allows women to preserve their fertility by freezing their eggs, offering greater flexibility in family planning and empowering individuals to take control of their reproductive futures. Additionally, we advocate for the importance of fertility preservation before undergoing cancer treatments, underscoring the need for proactive measures in safeguarding reproductive health. Overall, I remain optimistic about the future and committed to advancing conversations around reproductive health and empowerment in the region.

It is evident that fertility preservation measures like egg freezing can be financially prohibitive for many individuals. Are there any government initiatives or support systems in place to alleviate these costs and make such procedures more accessible?

The availability of financial assistance or government support for fertility preservation varies significantly from one country to another. In Saudi Arabia, for example, there currently is not any reimbursement for egg freezing procedures. However, in the UAE, there are provisions for medical reasons such as cancer treatment. Unfortunately, social freezing, which involves delaying childbearing for personal reasons, is not covered under these schemes.

How do you perceive the government’s engagement with issues surrounding women’s health, babies, and families, particularly in the context of the region, with a focus on Saudi Arabia? Do you feel that these topics are being actively addressed and prioritized by government initiatives?

Historically, women’s health and issues related to fertility were not given the priority they deserved, not only in Saudi Arabia but across the region. However, there has been a noticeable shift in recent years. Previously, fertility treatments were often viewed as elective rather than

essential medical care. However, with the World Health Organization now defining infertility as a disease, there’s been a growing advocacy for increased awareness and access to treatment.

Many companies, including CooperSurgical, are actively advocating for improved patient access to fertility treatments. We are also seeing a broader societal recognition of the importance of women’s health, including infertility treatment, as reflected in companies offering these treatments as part of their employee benefits to attract and retain female talent. However, there is still a long road ahead, and further awareness and advocacy efforts are needed to ensure that women have equitable access to these essential healthcare services.

From CooperSurgical’s perspective, we remain committed to innovation, investing in research and development, and supporting initiatives that empower women and promote women’s health. We work closely with our channel partners to ensure that our services and support are accessible and consistent across all markets, whether direct or distributor-based. Ultimately, our efforts align with the broader visions of countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which are increasingly recognizing the importance of addressing women’s health issues.

What are the main priorities or agenda items that you are working towards in collaboration with Mecomed particularly in advocating for challenges to be addressed in women’s health and diversity?

Within Mecomed my focus primarily centres on two key areas: innovation and data access and analytics. We believe that leveraging innovation and data analytics can significantly enhance efficiency and scalability within healthcare systems. By harnessing the power of data, we can analyse trends, identify areas for improvement, and ultimately provide more personalized and effective treatment options for patients.

One of the challenges we face is ensuring that government visions align with our goals. We recognize the importance of ensuring patient safety and data privacy while advocating for the adoption of innovative solutions. In regions like Europe, there are already established regulations such as GDPR that govern data privacy, and we ensure compliance with local and regional requirements in our developments.

While advocating for change may take time, we remain confident that with continued dialogue and demonstration of the benefits of these innovations, governments will be receptive to implementing policies that support improved patient outcomes, healthcare efficiency, and customized treatment

options. It’s a matter of persistence and maintaining a focus on the long-term benefits these changes can bring to the healthcare landscape.

You mentioned the challenges faced, particularly as a woman from the Middle East, yet you have attained a global role within the company. What advice would you give to other women striving for similar achievements?

Confidence is key, especially when overcoming barriers. Despite the challenges we may face, it is essential for women to remain fearless, stay confident, and believe in the contributions they can make. Personally, coming from Lebanon, one of the smallest countries in the world, achieving a global role was a significant accomplishment, driven by determination and belief in my capabilities.

As we come to the end of our discussion, looking ahead, what are your main priorities for the next three to five years?

My primary focus for the next three to five years is on increasing patient access to care. Despite the progress made, there is still much to be done globally to ensure everyone has equitable access to healthcare services.

I am deeply passionate about fertility, and I encourage couples not to hesitate in seeking help when it comes to fertility issues. There are solutions available for both men and women, and it is crucial to break through any cultural or familial taboos. Remember, seeking assistance is not a sign of weakness but a proactive step towards building a family.

See more interviews