Fars Alanazi – CEO, Saudi National Institute for Health (Saudi NIH)



Our efforts are dedicated to connecting scientific advancements with real-world impact, setting a new standard in how research can transform societies for the better

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Established as one of the initiatives launched by the Ministry of Health within Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the Saudi National Institute for Health (Saudi NIH) aims to strengthen the Kingdom's biomedical research landscape, funding high impact research and enhancing alignment with regulatory bodies.

CEO and former academic Prof Fars Alanazi walks us through these objectives, the institute's Ambassador of Knowledge programme, which engages health regulatory bodies, and its strides towards building on Saudi's clinical trials potential.

Could you start by sharing the ambitions and objectives of the Saudi National Institutes of Health (NIH), as well as the milestones you have achieved so far and your future direction?

At the end of 2020, I joined the Saudi NIH, a period marked by global challenges such as the pandemic. This time has demanded significant adaptation and innovation.

In Saudi Arabia, we have made significant strides in research, particularly since the establishment of the Ministry of Health and the inception of the first medical colleges and hospital research

centres. Funding for health research falls under the auspices of King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology, overseeing research across humanities, engineering, environmental science, and health. The landscape of clinical research in Saudi Arabia has evolved significantly, coinciding with transformations in our research and development sectors.

We are fortunate to possess robust infrastructure and benefit from visionary leadership and ample funding, particularly in healthcare. Our healthcare professionals include graduates trained at the world's top universities and hospitals, positioning us as regional leaders in healthcare workforce. Notably, Saudi Arabia produced over 12,000 publications in life and clinical sciences last year, underscoring our foundation in health research. However, our focus extends beyond output metrics like publications and dissertations. We aim to connect scientific research directly to tangible outcomes, benefiting patients, the healthcare ecosystem, and providers. This approach entails translating research findings into practical applications such as vaccines, therapeutics, medical devices, medical knowledge, and polices.

The Saudi NIH is guided by four primary goals: improving the health of our population, funding high impact research, enhancing the alignment to build more integrated model, and finally, translating these discoveries into meaningful impacts, whether financial, health-related, or societal.

We actively support scientists in bridging the gap between laboratory discoveries and practical healthcare applications, with a strong emphasis on clinical trials and translational research.We strive to enhance the clinical trial ecosystem in Saudi Arabia, acting as a catalyst for progress. Clinical trials are pivotal for registering any medical products, ensuring they meet regulatory standards like those of the SFDA. Similarly, translational research is now our priority. We prioritize research that yields actionable outcomes, such as policies or protocols tailored to the Saudipopulation, or innovations that improve patient care and treatment outcomes.

What would you say have been the biggest achievements and advancements for you personally and for the institute over the past few years?

It has been a rewarding journey for me, coming from academia with a deep understanding of the challenges within the health sector, particularly in research. With over 250 publications spanning pharmaceuticals, biotechnology, nanotechnology, and medicine, and having supervised more than 40 graduate students, I bring extensive experience. My career includes publishing over 10 books

and holding 17 international patents. However, I have faced first-hand the obstacles in translating discoveries from research labs to practical applications. Serving at the Saudi NIH is not just a job but a passion driven by my belief that Saudi Arabia’s scientists deserve a supportive ecosystem. Improving this ecosystem is crucial for advancing their discoveries and achieving our goals. I am keenly aware of our priorities, including enhancing clinical trials and evidence-based policy making essential for realizing our ambitions effectively.

Under the guidance and support of the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, my greatest achievement is being part of the team that play a key role in the process of securing official establishment approval and defining a clear mandate for the Saudi NIH. This accomplishment is particularly significant because the mandate originates from Saudi government bodies, specifically the ministerial cabinets, making it a legally binding document that aligns precisely with our objectives. It has not only facilitated widespread participation and engagement across Saudi Arabia but also empowered us to build a cohesive and proficient team. This foundation has enabled the Saudi NIH to swiftly adapt and capitalize on opportunities in today’s dynamic environment of transformation.

Ensuring alignment with national programs and strategies has been crucial, allowing us to demonstrate our capabilities through practical projects. These initiatives are essential for showcasing our mandate in action and earning credibility both internally within the Saudi NIH and externally. For instance, in research-skills education, we are addressing the need for tailored skills that better suit our population’s specific healthcare requirements, which often differ from those in other regions. This effort is part of our broader mission to enhance health-research skills and effectiveness, bridging gaps between research outcomes and actionable policies, protocols and even medical products.

Our commitment to these goals has fostered a shared belief in the Saudi NIH’s mandate among employees and leaders alike. Internally, there is a clear understanding of our role and responsibilities, while externally, stakeholders recognize our function in advancing medical knowledge and products that benefit Saudi Arabia’s healthcare landscape. This alignment is pivotal as we continue to collaborate with diverse stakeholders to refine and implement guidelines that meet the unique needs of our population.

Previously, our priorities were broad and encompassing, but now we have placed a strong emphasis on health and wellness as a core organizational and national priority, ranking among the top four priorities in Research, Development, and Innovation (RDI). This strategic focus guides our mission-driven approach, where we identify key areas such as diabetes for targeted intervention.

Diabetes, a complex condition with various types and factors, prompts us to convene councils that prioritize critical questions raised by healthcare providers, hospitals, societies, and regulators. For example, questions arise about the optimal insulin regimen for fasting patients during Ramadan. These inquiries, sourced directly from the field, inform our grant opportunities. Through these grants, we invite researchers, in collaboration with those from international centres, to propose innovative solutions. Upon funding promising proposals, we translate research findings into actionable outcomes, whether through policy development, guidelines or products of health-researchers.

In addition to advancing medical knowledge, we have initiated the Ambassador of Knowledge program, which engages health regulatory bodies like Saudi health council. This initiative ensures that scientific discoveries, such as the appropriate use of medications among diabetic patients, are promptly communicated to public health authorities. By collaborating closely with regulatory bodies, we aim to influence policy decisions that safeguard public health.

Our approach is twofold: starting from scientific inquiry and engaging regulatory stakeholders, or vice versa, ensuring a comprehensive approach to knowledge dissemination and policy formulation. This integrated strategy, known as the Ambassador of Knowledge, exemplifies our commitment to enhancing healthcare practices through evidence-based policies tailored to the needs of our community.

If we turn our focus to the research and development environment, it is true that globally, Saudi Arabia is aiming to be a leading hub. Can you shed some light on the current R&D landscape and your position in terms of clinical trials?

Where do we stand today? Today, Saudi Arabia stands at a pivotal juncture in its research and development journey. As a member of the G20, we have made significant strides. We rank highly in terms of international collaborations in research publications, often leading the region in publications co-authored with international scientists. Our H-Index, a measure of research impact, places us in a competitive position regionally, reflecting the quality and influence of our scientific output.

Education and workforce development are also areas where Saudi Arabia excels within the region. Our robust infrastructure forms a solid foundation upon which initiatives like Saudi NIH are built. The establishment of Saudi NIH underscores our commitment to not just organize and orchestrate but also to enhance and enable our research ecosystem.

While challenges exist, as they do in every country, Saudi NIH is dedicated to turning these into opportunities. We are actively fostering a conducive environment for research funding, utilization, and sustainability. Central to our strategy is the enhancement of the clinical trial ecosystem, ensuring that any limitations are identified and transformed into pathways for growth and innovation.

Moreover, we are aligning research centres across the country under a unified national strategy. This approach ensures that research priorities aren’t just theoretical but are actionable, contributing directly to national objectives and societal needs.

Your mandate is substantial and involves collaboration. Given the priority on advancing biotechnology and R&D, how do you approach partnerships, and what successful collaborations have you established with various stakeholders?

In Saudi Arabia today, collaboration across governmental sectors is integral to our approach. We operate as a unified team, collaborating closely with regulatory bodies, universities, hospitals, and research centres. Their enthusiastic support and active involvement, including their representation on the Saudi NIH board, exemplify a collective commitment to advancing our national healthcare research agenda.

The Ministry of Industry, as another pivotal stakeholder, is actively engaged as a board member of Saudi NIH. This collaboration ensures that industry perspectives and capabilities are seamlessly integrated into our strategic initiatives. Moreover, we foster strong partnerships with both national and international companies within the medical and pharmaceutical sectors. These collaborations extend beyond mere participation; they are strategic alliances aimed at achieving mutual goals and sharing in the successes that Saudi NIH enables.

These industry partnerships are crucial as they contribute significantly to the advancement of R&D in the healthcare sector. They bring invaluable expertise, resources, and technological innovations that complement our efforts to drive innovation and improve healthcare outcomes for our population.

What are your aspirations for the next three to five years here at Saudi NIH? What developments are you hoping to see in your country?

I firmly believe that we are currently standing on a mountain of unprecedented opportunity, not merely constructing it. My role is to extract the gold from this mountain of potential. While this is no small feat, I am confident in our capability to seize these opportunities. My hope is that Saudi NIH will pioneer a new era in global research management. We aim to establish innovative approaches, such as our knowledge ambassador model, which represents a paradigm shift in how we refine and showcase our scientific achievements to the world.

Moving forward, I envision a future where the impact of scientific research is palpable in our community, where we significantly reduce the incidence of prevalent diseases like diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases. Additionally, our ambition extends to fostering new discoveries in medication and healthcare interventions. This is a lofty goal, but one that aligns with the readiness of our resources and the systematic approach we are building.

Over the next few years, our focus will be on connecting health research outcomes directly with societal benefits. We are committed to achieving tangible results, including the development of new clinical trial products and the implementation of policies that enhance patient safety and well-being. Ultimately, we aim for science to lead our future, guiding us towards deeper insights into our community’s health needs and positioning Saudi Arabia as a hub of knowledge and innovation that influences global best practices.

I foresee a time when our contributions are recognized globally, where countries look to us not only for our policies and practices but also for the ground-breaking advancements we make in healthcare and biomedical sciences. This vision is within reach, and I am optimistic that with concerted effort and collaboration, we will achieve these milestones in due course.

What final message would you like to share with our international readers, your peers in the global research ecosystem, as well as stakeholders here in Saudi Arabia and the region?

Saudi Arabia, historically known for its oil, is now forging a path towards a future defined by ambitious visions like Neom [new urban area in Tabuk] and The Line [a linear smart city]. As we move forward, our commitment to scientific discovery and innovation will become increasingly evident. We aim not only to produce significant scientific outcomes but also to ensure these

findings directly benefit our communities, patients, and contribute to tackling diseases effectively.

In a relatively short span of time, Saudi Arabia is poised to emerge as a pioneer in global research and healthcare. Our efforts are dedicated to connecting scientific advancements with real-world impact, setting a new standard in how research can transform societies for the better.

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