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Despite the inherent challenges of operating in a region with diverse cultural backgrounds and hierarchical structures, fostering a culture of trust and fairness has proven effective in navigating these complexities

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After various leadership roles at Takeda over the course of ten years, Khaled Sary has taken on the position of general manager for the West Gulf cluster, which encompasses Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain. In conversation with PharmaBoardroom, Sary discusses the significant growth the Japanese pharma has seen in the Saudi market; the company's strategic focus on innovation; the transformation of Saudi's regulatory processes; Takeda's push to include Saudi Arabia in global clinical trials, and the importance of maintaining a strong internal culture in a diverse region.

With over a decade at Takeda behind you, could you share the journey that led you to your current role overseeing the West Gulf cluster for the company?

I am a physician by education and training and began my career in pharma as a medical representative, eventually leading me to relocate from Egypt to Saudi Arabia in 2001. Since then, I have been deeply immersed in the Saudi market, progressing through various roles including medical rep, sales and marketing manager, and business unit head. I have also had the opportunity to witness significant industry dynamics, including mergers such as that between Schering-Plough and MSD, before joining Takeda as a business unit manager.

My journey with Takeda has taken me through different roles across Saudi, the Gulf, the Middle East, and now back to Saudi, where I currently serve as the head of the region headquartered in

Saudi, overseeing the West Gulf cluster, which includes Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain.

How does Takeda’s strategic shift towards specialty care and rare diseases align with its positioning in the Saudi market?

Takeda’s strategic shift towards specialty care and rare diseases mirrors global trends and reflects our commitment to meeting evolving healthcare needs. In Saudi Arabia, where the primary care and over-the-counter (OTC) sectors traditionally dominated, we recognized the potential for growth in specialty care. By focusing on innovation and outsourcing primary care and OTC business, we are strategically positioned to bring cutting-edge treatments to Saudi Arabia, catering specifically to the demand for innovative healthcare solutions in the region.

What factors are driving the significant sales growth Takeda is experiencing in the Saudi market?

We attribute the remarkable sales growth in the Saudi market to our focus on innovation and comprehensive patient services. By introducing new products and actively collaborating with Saudi authorities to elevate healthcare standards, we are capitalizing on opportunities presented by various initiatives under the umbrella of Vision 2030. This strategic alignment has propelled our growth trajectory significantly.

How would you assess the significance of the Saudi market for Takeda both regionally and on a global scale?

We regard Saudi Arabia as a pivotal market within the region, despite its relatively modest contribution to global revenues. Regionally, its rapid growth and alignment with transformative initiatives of Vision 2030 makes it a considerable market. Its importance is underscored by the opportunities it presents for companies that can swiftly adapt and compete in its dynamic landscape. However, it is worth noting that the pace of change in Saudi Arabia demands a high level of agility, which can pose challenges for larger pharmaceutical companies accustomed to slower decision-making processes. Therefore, for Takeda, readiness and agility are imperative to navigate the market effectively.

In light of Takeda’s robust global pipeline, what are the key therapeutic areas the company will focus on in Saudi Arabia in the coming years?

Takeda maintains a clear focus on gastrointestinal (GI), oncology, plasma-derived products, and rare diseases in Saudi Arabia. While we are globally focused on neurology and have plans for vaccine development, these areas are not yet available in Saudi Arabia, but we are actively looking forward to their introduction. Importantly, our strong innovative pipeline aligns seamlessly with the objectives of Saudi Arabia’s health authorities, who are committed to bringing innovation to the country’s healthcare landscape. This synergy ensures that our therapeutic priorities are well-aligned with the evolving healthcare needs and objectives in Saudi Arabia.

Given the high prevalence of certain rare diseases in Saudi Arabia, attributed in part to factors like consanguinity, do you believe the country presents an opportunity for rare disease-focused companies to significantly impact patient outcomes?

Saudi Arabia’s unique demographics and healthcare landscape offer a promising arena for addressing rare diseases. In fact, without mentioning specific products, Takeda has achieved notable success in this field. While our primary focus is ensuring innovative treatments are accessible to all patients, there is certainly potential for rare disease companies to make a meaningful difference in Saudi Arabia. Payers as well exerted huge efforts to enhance reimbursement pathways that would pay more upon having more flexibility for innovation and to be officially published under a unified umbrella.

Access to innovative treatments is crucial, especially in a rapidly evolving market like Saudi Arabia. How well-prepared is the regulatory and payer framework to accommodate Takeda’s pipeline of new innovations?

The landscape is undergoing significant transformation, particularly in terms of regulatory processes and access speed. Saudi Arabia is implementing pilot programs to streamline registration procedures, allowing for parallel filings with major regulatory agencies like the FDA. This initiative accelerates the approval timeline for innovative products, a stark contrast to the previously lengthy registration periods. Today, we are seeing instances where products can be registered within a remarkably short span, sometimes as quickly as two months.

The Saudi FDA’s attainment of WHO level four status marks a significant milestone, indicative of transformative changes in its systems and processes. How does this elevation impact access to innovative treatments?

This achievement reflects the comprehensive overhaul in regulatory frameworks, leading to expedited approvals and enhanced access to innovative treatments. Importantly, access now encompasses more than just pricing; it extends to the quality of services provided alongside the products. Discussions with Saudi authorities encompass innovative market access strategies, including collaborations with healthcare institutions, patient support programmes and elevated standards of care are integral components of our approach, emphasizing a holistic patient-centric model beyond product innovation alone.

Health technology assessment (HTA) plays a crucial role in the process of accessing new therapies. Could you elaborate on the current status of HTA implementation in Saudi Arabia?

Health technology assessment is integrated into the access processes; however, there is no centralized body overseeing it for the entire Kingdom. While collaboration occurs with the Ministry of Health and HTA entities, a comprehensive umbrella organization is yet to be established. Despite this, HTA is operational within specific sectors. By the time HTA is fully implemented, we are hopeful that policies will be articulated to address the Kingdom’s leading efforts to enhance access to care and that there will be dedicated pathways for innovative treatments that are distinguished out of the conventional pathways.

When introducing new therapies, especially for rare diseases, how is Takeda addressing the challenge of healthcare professionals’ (HCP) education and awareness building in Saudi Arabia?

Contrary to past perceptions, Saudi Arabia boasts a framework of experienced healthcare professionals in specialized areas, thanks to substantial investments in education and training abroad. Many returned professionals now lead hospitals and centers of excellence, providing a solid foundation. Takeda leverages this expertise through educational initiatives, including referral programs and primary care centre outreach, aimed at enhancing disease awareness and differential diagnosis capabilities. Additionally, we are continually working on upgrading our

internal capabilities to meet evolving market needs.

Clinical trials play a pivotal role in the development of and access to new therapies, especially for diseases prevalent in specific regions. What has Takeda's approach to conducting clinical trials in Saudi Arabia been?

Our efforts to include Saudi Arabia in global clinical trials date back more than five years, reflecting our commitment to leveraging regional expertise and infrastructure. With the recent transformation and the demonstrated readiness and capabilities in Saudi Arabia, we have successfully integrated the country into both global and regional research initiatives. This inclusion not only expands opportunities for our current pipeline but also aligns with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, which emphasizes studies, real-world evidence, and research advancements.

In order to further integrate Saudi Arabia into global and regional clinical trials, what infrastructure improvements or additions do you believe are necessary?

Clearer processes and approval procedures are essential for expediting trial execution and patient recruitment. By enhancing efficiency and meeting expectations, we can not only maintain our current position, but also expand our presence in global and regional trials. Securing faster execution and patient recruitment will be key to unlocking future opportunities in Saudi Arabia.

With Saudi Arabia aiming to become a regional research and development hub by 2030 and a global hub by 2040, what role can research-driven companies like Takeda play in advancing this agenda?

Our focus extends beyond clinical trials to encompass supporting researchers, fostering collaborations, and elevating research standards. We facilitate interactions between local researchers and global experts, enhancing their capabilities and integrating them into the global research community. Additionally, we identify and nurture emerging talents, particularly in rare diseases, by providing support and exposure to our global research networks. By contributing to the research ecosystem, we are helping to cultivate a robust pipeline of research talent in Saudi Arabia, aligning with the country's ambitious research and development goals.

How have you contributed to fostering a unified company culture amidst organizational changes, including mergers and acquisitions?

Maintaining a strong internal culture has been a priority for Takeda in the Saudi market, especially amidst cultural differences and the influx of new talent due to Saudization initiatives. Transparency, trust-building, and clear communication of objectives have been key focus areas. We prioritize cross-functional teamwork, ensuring alignment with our vision and strategy through transparent communication. Additionally, investing in education and skill development, fostering open discussions, and maintaining an open-door policy have been instrumental in overcoming cultural challenges and ensuring agility in our operations. Despite the inherent challenges of operating in a region with diverse cultural backgrounds and hierarchical structures, fostering a culture of trust and fairness has proven effective in navigating these complexities. With Saudization initiatives in place, our local workforce now constitutes more than 40 percent of our total workforce. Notably, in customer-facing roles such as product specialists or account leads, our workforce comprises 100 percent local talent.

How does Takeda’s global focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion translate within the context of Saudi Arabia?

I have been pleasantly surprised by the competitiveness, high education levels, and determination of Saudi professionals. At Takeda, we prioritize attitude and cultural fit over specific skills during the selection process. We believe that skills can be taught, but mindset and cultural alignment are crucial. As a result, we have cultivated a high performing team, although we do face challenges with talent retention as professionals often receive attractive offers from other companies. Nevertheless, our focus on nurturing an inclusive internal culture serves as a retention strategy.

Looking ahead, with your extensive experience in the industry and now in your role as the head of both Takeda’s operations in Saudi Arabia and the regional headquarters, what are your expectations for the next few years as Saudi Arabia continues its journey towards 2030?

There is a lot of optimism amidst the changes. One aspect worth noting is the room for improvement. With the rapid pace of development, mistakes are inevitable, but what is crucial is the willingness to learn and adapt. There is a commendable openness to feedback from various stakeholders, facilitating better alignment and progress. However, we need to balance this speed

with realistic objectives and timelines to ensure sustainable growth. Ultimately, the goal is to deliver medications to patients in need, and while the process can be challenging, continual improvement will undoubtedly ease the journey.

Any final thoughts?

On behalf of Takeda, we take immense pride in our mission to help patients and bring them innovative solutions. Witnessing the transformation in Saudi Arabia is truly remarkable, as it elevates the standards of care and fosters advancements in healthcare. Saudi Arabia's rapid growth in technology and innovation within the healthcare sector is impressive on a global scale, not just regionally. We consider ourselves fortunate to be a part of Takeda and to contribute to progress in Saudi Arabia.

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