Ali ElAkkad – General Manager Middle East & Pakistan, Bausch & Lomb



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Ali ElAkkad, General Manager of Bausch & Lomb Pharma and Consumer for the Middle East and Pakistan, shares insights into the company's strategic priorities and its commitment to innovation in the region. He discusses how Bausch & Lomb is focusing on bringing high-quality ophthalmology products to market, fostering a high-performance culture, and empowering local talent and professional education. ElAkkad also highlights the importance of the Middle East region for Bausch & Lomb, emphasizing the region's growing digital savviness and its potential for continued growth in the eye care sector.

Could you please begin by introducing yourself and sharing some insights into your professional journey which led you to your role today?

I have over 20 years of experience in the healthcare industry. Out of these, I have spent around 18 years working in ophthalmology, which has been the most interesting and rewarding therapeutic area for me. Most of my career has been spent in Saudi Arabia and UAE where I had the opportunity to work across various specialties within ophthalmology. I have experience in both the medical devices and surgical sectors, working with innovations such as surgical instruments, laser machines, and other technologies.

I also had the chance to work in the vision care and lens care sectors which provided me with a broader perspective on consumer eye care dynamics. However, the majority of my career has been in the pharmaceutical and consumer parts of the industry where I spent over eight years. Additionally, I have worked in other specialties such as rare disease disorders, dermatology, and gastroenterology which has helped expand my overall perspective on healthcare.

Most recently, I have had the privilege of leading Bausch & Lomb's Pharma and Consumer organization for the Middle East cluster for the past six years.

As the general manager of the Middle East and Pakistan, can you tell us a little bit more about how Bausch & Lomb operates in the region?

In the region, Bausch & Lomb operates in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, where we have dedicated teams promoting our products. We also work with valuable local partners who support our operations in these markets. In both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, we have established a legal presence, allowing us to manage our activities more closely. For the rest of the markets in the region, we rely on a network of distributors who have been our partners for many years. These distributors work closely with our team to ensure that product access and quality meet the global standards we uphold.

What do you consider to be some of the most significant dynamics shaping the ophthalmology areas across the Middle East region and in Saudi Arabia specifically?

In the Middle East, and specifically in the Gulf region, one of the most significant dynamics in ophthalmology is the high prevalence of dry eye which affects the majority of the population. This condition has gained more attention as a result of the increased screen time and digital engagement since 2020, especially during COVID. As people spent more time behind screens, they became more aware of eye care and self-care, which led to a rise in education about these issues.

The increased access to technology, the internet, and data has also empowered people to research their vision concerns and seek better consultation from doctors. It has become common for people to know about dry eye, LASIK, contact lenses, and other vision solutions. This awareness has had a significant impact on the market, driving growth over the past five years and contributing to the development of the eye care industry as a whole.

In Saudi Arabia specifically, dry eye is one of the largest segments in the eye care market. This is an area where we have introduced several innovations over the years, offering solutions that meet the needs of both patients and healthcare professionals. Dry eye remains the most significant and fastest-growing segment in the Eye Care market, and we continue to focus on bringing more innovations to address this need.

Other important therapeutic areas in Saudi Arabia include glaucoma, eye readiness relievers, and anti-VEGFs treatments for neurovascular diseases, which are also common. However, our primary focus today remains on dry eye as it is the largest and most prominent segment in the market, and we are committed to providing the best treatment solutions for patients in this area.

Bausch & Lomb offers a broad portfolio, from contact lenses to pharmaceuticals and surgical products. How have you tailored these offerings to meet the specific needs of consumers and healthcare providers in Saudi Arabia?

As I oversee the pharma and consumer segment in the region, we have structured our offerings to meet the unique needs of local patients and healthcare providers. Bausch & Lomb operates across several segments globally to ensure we are focused on patient needs. Our pharma and consumer business includes a range of products specialized in areas like dry eye, glaucoma, anti-infectives, red eye relievers, and more advanced dry eye treatments. This allows us to address a wide variety of needs in ophthalmology.

We also have a surgical segment which provides equipment for the anterior segment, such as cataract surgeries, as well as for vitrectomy surgeries for the retina. Additionally, we offer laser equipment for LASIK treatments, providing different levels of technology for various treatment options.

Another key area of focus for us is vision care, where we provide contact lenses and lens care solutions, tailored to meet the specific needs of consumers and patients. This broad portfolio allows us to offer comprehensive solutions for both healthcare professionals and patients across different segments.

Can you discuss any recent product launches or upcoming innovations that are particularly relevant to these markets?

Bausch & Lomb, with more than 170 years of experience in eye care, has consistently brought innovative solutions to the market. As a pharmaceutical and healthcare company, innovation is in our DNA and we are always focused on introducing new products. When operating in a large geography, like the Middle East, innovation is introduced in stages, with markets like Saudi Arabia and the UAE often serving as early adopters. These markets incentivize innovation by offering fast-track registration, allowing us to introduce products quickly, often shortly after their launch in the U.S. This helps ensure access to a wide range of patients and healthcare providers.

A recent product launch that has been particularly relevant in Saudi Arabia and the UAE is Lumify™—an over-the-counter eye redness reliever. This product has been well-received in the market because it addresses eye redness caused by minor irritations. Lumify™ is a great addition to our portfolio, offering a solution that meets the needs of consumers seeking immediate eye redness relief that works in one minute.

How would you characterize access to innovation across the region and in Saudi Arabia particularly, both in terms of progress and ongoing challenges?

I would say that the progress in Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf region in general, has been impressive, especially since 2009 when more regulations started to be introduced into the healthcare environment. These regulations have greatly improved the quality of products in the market and enhanced access to these products. The Saudi FDA is highly regulated and one of the most advanced regulatory bodies globally. They are proactive in engaging with both multinational and local companies to address their needs and work on evolving and improving the healthcare landscape.

I recently had the opportunity to attend a workshop with the Saudi FDA where they sought feedback from the industry on how to improve local content and manufacturing. This level of collaboration is remarkable because the authorities view us as partners which allows us to actively participate in shaping the industry and regulations. This collaborative approach extends to the Gulf region and the Middle East, where many health authorities are flexible and open to listening to companies. Industry associations, working groups, and task forces are key to this ongoing collaboration—ensuring that the regulatory environment continues to improve.

Although vision is highly impactful on quality of life, ophthalmology does not garner the same level of attention as immediately life-threatening areas like oncology How do you feel the eye care segment is being prioritized across your region by local health authorities?

While it is true that some therapeutic areas often take priority due to their immediate life-threatening nature, I believe that eye care is still being prioritized in the region. There are certain areas, like oncology, that require more immediate attention and substantial health budget allocation, but this does not diminish the importance of eye care.

For example, King Khaled Eye Specialist Hospital, one of the leading eye care facilities in the region, plays a pivotal role in eye care in Saudi Arabia. It serves thousands of patients annually and leads in both education and the dissemination of knowledge about eye care. If eye care were not considered important, the government would not support such institutions. Recently, King Khaled Eye Specialist Hospital also became a non-profit organization under the Royal Commission and established a research center, highlighting the government's commitment to advancing eye care research and innovation. This progress demonstrates that eye care is a priority for health authorities in the region.

How is Bausch & Lomb contributing to Saudi Arabia's healthcare transformation under Vision 2030, particularly in driving innovation, fostering local talent, building strategic partnerships, and advancing healthcare outcomes in the Kingdom?

Vision 2030 has been a major source of inspiration, driving transformation in Saudi Arabia and encouraging companies and leaders to align their strategies with the Kingdom's ambitious goals. This vision has reshaped how people view Saudi Arabia, as we have witnessed significant, rapid changes across various sectors. As a company, Bausch & Lomb has aligned itself with these changes by establishing a strong local presence in Saudi Arabia which directly contributes to bringing innovation to the country and fostering the development of local talent. Most of our team in Saudi Arabia is made up of local professionals, reflecting our commitment to contributing to the Kingdom's growth.

Under this transformation initiative, we have accelerated the introduction of several innovative products to the market. This aligns with the government's goal of improving healthcare and enhancing access to cutting-edge treatments. We also work closely with various governmental institutions and healthcare authorities to ensure that patients have better access to our products.

Additionally, we have initiated several local programs that support the broader objectives of Vision 2030.

As part of our commitment to education, we partner with authorities, hospitals, and different associations to elevate the level of training for healthcare practitioners, particularly ophthalmologists. Bausch & Lomb, with over 170 years of experience, is proud to be a global partner that healthcare professionals can rely on across various countries—including Saudi Arabia. Our extensive portfolio is available in many regions, providing a consistent and reliable range of solutions. Furthermore, we actively engage in congresses and other educational events, contributing to the development and advancement of healthcare education in local communities.

With Saudi Arabia prioritizing digital transformation, how do you see digital initiatives impacting healthcare outcomes locally, whether through enhanced accessibility, product innovation, patient education, or other areas?

In today’s era of artificial intelligence, digital transformation is playing a crucial role in improving healthcare outcomes in Saudi Arabia. AI and data are being used extensively to enhance efficiency and effectiveness in healthcare. For instance, we rely on platforms like IQVIA which provide valuable data that helps optimize sales force effectiveness, market screening, and other critical aspects of healthcare operations. This use of technology is vital for pharmaceutical and healthcare companies to stay ahead.

The digital environment has also changed how healthcare professionals interact with one another. In the past, all interactions with doctors had to be face-to-face, but today, even when doctors are not on duty or traveling, they can still engage in digital meetings. This has greatly improved the level of professional engagement and education.

Social media has also increased the reach to consumers. Patient education has grown as people now have easy access to information online which allows them to search for answers and gain knowledge. A few years ago, patients had to sift through articles and research before reaching a conclusion. Today, AI-powered search engines can even provide short, clear summaries and guide patients to consult with healthcare practitioners for more specific advice.

Governments are also adopting AI to address patient needs more efficiently and we are seeing continuous growth in this area. The ongoing evolution of digital initiatives in healthcare will continue to improve accessibility, product innovation, and patient education —ultimately benefiting

both patients and healthcare professionals.

Looking ahead, what are your strategic priorities for not only your team, but Bausch & Lomb across the region?

We, of course, are focused on bringing innovations to the market and navigating the rapidly changing environment. We need to stay adaptable and be able to respond quickly to market shifts and challenges.

To accomplish this innovative drive, we place a strong emphasis on fostering a high-performance culture within the organization. Accountability and ownership are key values for us and we believe it is important for everyone to take ownership of their roles, whether it be in business operations or specific functions. This helps empower our teams to perform at their best and respond swiftly to the needs of our customers and patients.

Our patients and customers are always at the heart of our priorities. Ensuring they receive our products on time and with the highest quality standards is crucial. Additionally, the development of our people and attracting top talent that fits within our culture and contributes to our success remains a key focus for me.

All in all, the region represents a significant opportunity for growth and we have seen this momentum increase over the years. The population is digitally savvy, and the level of education is rapidly improving, making it easier to integrate new technologies. As a company that has been leading in eye care for 170 years, Bausch & Lomb is committed to continuing to bring the best products and quality to our patients —aligning with our mission to help them see better and live better.

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