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This is an unprecedented opportunity to contribute to a transformative era in medical science and shape the future of neurological care

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Neuroscience in Saudi Arabia is undergoing a quiet revolution. With unprecedented investment in research, cutting-edge clinical trials, and a push to redefine patient care, the country is rapidly positioning itself as a key player in global neurological advancements. From expanding access to specialized treatments to fostering cross-border collaborations, its ambitions are reshaping the future of the field says Dr Ahmad Abulaban.

How has your expertise in neurology shaped your perspective on the evolving neuroscience landscape in Saudi Arabia, and what key factors are driving its rapid advancement?

As a neurology consultant at King Abdulaziz Medical City (KAMC) and an assistant professor at King Saud bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences (KSAU-HS), I play a key role in medical education, overseeing students as the chief coordinator for the neuroscience block and directing the neurology residency training program. My specialization in neuroimmunology, multiple sclerosis, and neurophysiology has provided me with deep insights into the field's continuous evolution.

Neuroscience is advancing at an unprecedented pace, outstripping many other medical disciplines in both research progress and clinical innovation. Breakthroughs in academic knowledge and therapeutic development are transforming the landscape, enabling treatments for conditions that

were once deemed untreatable. This rapid evolution is not only redefining patient care but also positioning Saudi Arabia at the forefront of cutting-edge neurological research and practice. As global advancements continue to accelerate, the region is embracing this momentum, fostering an environment of medical and scientific progress.

How is neuroscience integrated into Saudi Arabia's national agenda and Vision 2030 healthcare transformation?

Neuroscience is gaining prominence within Saudi Arabia's healthcare transformation, with increasing government investment in research and innovation. Institutions such as the Saudi National Institute of Health (Saudi NIH) and the Research, Development, and Innovation Authority (RDIA) are spearheading this effort, offering substantial funding to drive scientific progress. Some grants reach up to 10 million Saudi Riyals (approximately \$2.5 to \$3 million), fostering large-scale research collaborations between Saudi universities and international institutions.

This strategic funding is not limited to academic research but extends to the private sector, encouraging cross-disciplinary partnerships that accelerate advancements in neurological science. By prioritizing research funding and fostering collaboration, Saudi Arabia is solidifying neuroscience as a key pillar of its broader healthcare and innovation strategy, aligning with Vision 2030's ambition to position the country as a leader in medical research and scientific excellence.

How is Saudi Arabia advancing neurological research, and what role do clinical trials and innovation play in this transformation?

Saudi Arabia is rapidly expanding its research capabilities in neurology, moving beyond late-stage clinical trials to establish a more comprehensive research ecosystem. Institutions such as the King Abdullah International Medical Research Center (KAIMRC) are leading this effort, with dedicated infrastructure for early-phase clinical trials. The establishment of a phase one trial unit marks a significant milestone, signaling the country's commitment to advancing drug development and fostering collaboration with global research institutions. Experts like Dr. Kanan Alshammari are actively working to initiate and oversee these early-stage trials, reinforcing Saudi Arabia's position as an emerging hub for clinical research.

Beyond clinical trials, the country is embracing cutting-edge innovations in precision medicine, artificial intelligence, and big data analytics. Recognizing the immense computational power

required for AI-driven research, institutions have approved high-capacity Graphics Processing Units (GPUs), enabling more sophisticated data analysis and accelerating breakthroughs in neurological science. This integration of advanced technology is reshaping the research landscape, driving forward new treatment possibilities.

My involvement spans multiple clinical trials, including research on BTK inhibitors, a promising class of therapies for progressive multiple sclerosis. Additionally, I am part of the REMODEL clinical trial and a global study on Efgartigimod alfa, a novel treatment for generalized myasthenia gravis (gMG) in seronegative patients. These studies reflect the country's growing engagement in high-impact neurological research.

Multiple sclerosis remains the most prevalent autoimmune disease affecting the brain and spinal cord, disproportionately impacting young adults, particularly women. Previously, limited treatment options meant that many patients developed severe disabilities over time. However, Saudi Arabia's commitment to accessible healthcare has ensured that all MS medications are provided free of charge by the government, fundamentally changing disease outcomes. Advances in treatment have dramatically reduced disability rates, making cases of wheelchair-bound or bedridden patients increasingly rare, except in instances where treatment is refused or delayed. This progress underscores the transformative impact of modern therapies and the country's dedication to elevating neurological care and research.

How does the pharmaceutical industry contribute to neuroscience in Saudi Arabia, and how do you collaborate with it?

The pharmaceutical industry plays an essential role in advancing neuroscience by supporting research, education, and professional training. As the research officer of the Multiple Sclerosis (MS) chapter within the Saudi Neurological Society (SNS), I oversee one of its most active divisions, organizing extensive academic programs for physicians, neurologists, and the broader medical community. Pharmaceutical sponsorship is a key enabler of these initiatives, facilitating knowledge exchange and driving scientific progress.

A major milestone in these efforts will be the inaugural Saudi MS Chapter Meeting in April, designed to showcase local research, highlight the latest advancements in MS treatment, and foster collaboration between universities and medical institutions. This initiative reflects Saudi Arabia's commitment to strengthening its neurological research ecosystem and enhancing patient care through innovation.

How is Saudi Arabia addressing stigma and promoting awareness of neurological disorders, including multiple sclerosis?

Saudi Arabia has developed a robust framework for raising awareness and reducing stigma around neurological disorders, particularly multiple sclerosis. Central to these efforts are patient-led support groups, which play a vital role in education, advocacy, and community engagement. Organizations such as Said in Riyadh, Wasm in Jeddah, Arfa in the Eastern Region, and Azm provide patients and their families with essential resources while fostering a broader understanding of these conditions.

Government support ensures these initiatives remain impactful, but funding is now tied to measurable outcomes. The Ministry of Social Services regularly assesses each group's objectives and effectiveness. Organizations that fail to meet their targets are given six months to demonstrate improvement before funding is reevaluated. This structured approach ensures that resources are allocated efficiently, driving meaningful progress in public awareness, early intervention, and patient support.

How accessible is neurological care in Saudi Arabia, and what challenges remain in the patient pathway?

Neurological care in Saudi Arabia has seen remarkable progress, particularly in improving patient access. Previously, new referrals could take four to five months, but regulatory efforts have reduced this to less than four weeks. Ensuring timely access is a key healthcare performance indicator (KPI) and a critical component of Vision 2030, driving institutions to expand clinical capacity and enhance efficiency.

Despite these advancements, challenges remain, particularly in the shortage of specialized neurologists. Expanding the physician workforce is a priority, with ongoing efforts to enhance incentives and increase medical training opportunities. Additionally, advanced neurological care is concentrated in Riyadh, Jeddah, and the Eastern Region, requiring patients with complex conditions to travel significant distances for specialized treatment. Strengthening regional healthcare infrastructure and distributing expertise more evenly will be essential to ensuring equitable access to high-quality neurological care across the country.

How is Saudi Arabia transforming its neuroscience landscape, and what opportunities does this create for international collaboration?

Saudi Arabia is undergoing a rapid transformation, redefining its medical and research landscape with substantial investments in neuroscience. The country is expanding its research capabilities, strengthening academic and industry collaborations, and enhancing its healthcare infrastructure to position itself as a leader in medical innovation. This progress aligns with Vision 2030, which prioritizes advancements in healthcare, medical education, and scientific discovery, fostering a more integrated and globally competitive ecosystem.

The momentum extends beyond healthcare, with Saudi Arabia set to host major global events such as Expo 2030 and the FIFA World Cup 2034, further accelerating development across multiple sectors. These initiatives will not only enhance the country's international engagement but also create new opportunities for scientific collaboration, clinical research, and investment in cutting-edge treatments. With its rapidly evolving research landscape, expanding infrastructure, and commitment to innovation, Saudi Arabia offers a dynamic environment for groundbreaking discoveries in neuroscience. I encourage international researchers, healthcare leaders, and pharmaceutical companies to explore the vast potential for collaboration. This is an unprecedented opportunity to contribute to a transformative era in medical science and play a role in shaping the future of neurological care.

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