

Interview with Ahmad al-Ghazawi, CEO, Triumpharma Product Development & Clinical Evaluation Centre



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Triumpharma is part of the next generation Jordanian pharmaceutical success stories and exactly what Jordan needs to make the next step in development! Would you tell us, what were the opportunities you saw to start such a specialized firm back then and what role did you envision for the coy in the aforementioned development?

Jordan has an excellent foundation for supporting high tech ventures, and the knowledge in my country, the rich pool of work forces, and the commitment of King Abdullah II and the government to turn Jordan into a center of excellence combined with my patriotic urge to contribute to the growth of the country encouraged me to found this company. The decision to establish the headquarter in Jordan was driven by being Jordanian, but the business plan was very well thought through for the previous mentioned reasons.

It was not an easy decision and required a lot of guts to invest in such a risky venture. Many of my friends said I was wasting the investment money and that investing in real estate and land would give us a much better multiplier. I decided to continue the venture because I felt it would be a long-term commitment that would make me, family and country proud, and that it would give me the satisfaction needed to continue. In the end it is not just about money and figures, but also about euphoria and the opportunity to make a difference.

And you proved your friends wrong; ten years down the line it is safe to say that you have turned Triumpharma into a success! What have been the biggest achievements and milestones in the company development since its inception?

Penetrating the European and American markets were the main milestones. It took a lot of hard work to accommodate the top standards that Europe & the US follow in conducting human and animal research in an emerging country such as Jordan.

The fact that the technology exists in the US & Europe makes it sound simple, but not everything simple is easy. It required a lot of effort to train the workforce, to install an overall quality system, a good communication approach and a good foundation and infrastructure. We have to take into account that all this needs to be installed, maintained and kept adaptable to accommodate new trends. Our industry is always evolving, which makes it a constant challenge to stay updated.

I feel that this was our biggest achievement; it might sound modest to others but it took a lot of hard work and risk. It required perseverance to run a company that was losing money for many years.

What was the turning point then in the company development?

The turning point came when we received European and American approval. This gave us a lot of credibility and it made the company an international CRO rather than a regional and local one.

Jordan after the ascendancy of King Abdullah II has been investing heavily to follow the success stories of Ireland & Singapore in becoming a knowledge based economy. Looking at the pharma side, would you outline the biggest challenges & opportunities the country faces in becoming an R&D hub today?

Jordan has great opportunities but of course also challenges; it has its own set of weaknesses & strengths. The country's biggest opportunity is the global and open mindset of its people. I was at the right time with the right idea; I was lucky and do not view myself as special as I have met many highly motivated Jordanians that could have done the same thing – they do whatever it takes to achieve their target.

There are challenges however. Venture capital is seizing ideas of our entrepreneurs, and the government has financial constraints and cannot really support financially start-ups – note that this is not criticism; Jordan lacks the national resources and the King and the government are doing what they can to facilitate startups. The opportunities are nonetheless huge especially given the human capital, the young and well educated people with new ideas and an entrepreneurial spirit.

Furthermore we need to capitalize our free trade agreements with the US, Canada and bi-lateral trade agreements with certain countries. My belief is that many Jordanian businessmen do not know how to use these agreements, so we need to educate ourselves. We need to attract more FDI; we need to stimulate big pharma to license end products to Jordanian pharma companies; we need to have collaboration with third party distribution channels in order to penetrate new markets rather than stick to the ones that we have been targeting for the last thirty years. Creating new markets, products, partnerships with big pharma and with national distribution channels, go into

new markets in Africa and Central Asia; there are huge opportunities out there. Jordan is very well positioned to accommodate new products, biosimilars and new technologies. Now that many patents are expiring – it has been said that 82 billion dollars of patented biosimilars will be available to copy without violating IP by 2020 – huge opportunities are opening up.

The Triumpharma business strategy is to develop and provide innovative drug delivery systems and added-value pharmaceuticals, bioanalytical services, clinical research services, and pharmaceutical R&D services. Would you outline what are the focus areas today?

Triumpharma has two key areas. The first is internal R&D to develop innovative drug delivery systems. We have converted injectable insulin to oral insulin and we are working on anti-biotic that can increase permeability almost five times. This lowers the side effects and costs that come with high doses and increases patient compliance and overall health benefits to the patients.

Triumpharma also offers services from the lead optimization stage when the drug is actually discovered; we can conduct early phase animal studies and phase one through four research. A lot of clients tell me that we do not appreciate our own company enough; Triumpharma is the only company they know that has all this expertise and services under one roof. Some have said that Triumpharma could easily turn into a discovery company; I hope that I can achieve within my lifetime – to build the first homegrown Jordanian drug discovery company for new treatments.

In that regard corporate relationships are of course of vital importance; what are the partnerships you are looking to foster when it comes to R&D? To which extent does your extensive experience in working for MNCs prove an asset in setting up partnerships?

We work with big pharma to provide them with expertise to support product development. We also partner with business development companies in the US & Europe to represent us because we have limitations to marketing.

We have excellent scientific consultants and professors in Europe and the US that add additional resources to our internal expertise. We collaborate intensively with academia in Jordan. We participate in the Faculty for Factory Program, under which professors spend their three summer months with us to conduct private industry research rather than focusing on ideas just for publication & promotion.

That is another point on the Jordanian agenda: we need to modify our educational system. Even though our educational system is considered top notch in the MENA region there is a lot that we can do to tune what is taught at the academia with the demands of the private market place. We need to encourage doctors to publish research that is needed in the national private and public domains rather than just publish any subject to get promoted from assistant professor to associate

to a full professor. Jordan needs to work on creating a knowledge based economy – not just by collecting information but by tuning the foundation of our curriculum with the national priorities and industry needs.

One of the challenges Jordan has dealt with is IP protection, in your field of course of utmost importance. While the Jordanian gvt in the past was often criticized for registering unauthorized copycat drugs made by local manufacturers and applying discriminatory measures towards multinationals, the government took appropriate measures and IP is much better respected! How would you assess the IP environment in Jordan today?

Today Jordan has an excellent adherence to Intellectual Property. We have a clear record as far as I know and we are doing much better than Israel, which is considered by many Europeans and Americans as part of the Western world.

In a way we should protect our main industries through subsidies. The US subsidizes their corn industry, Europe subsidizes its agricultural industries, Korea subsidizes its steel industries; Jordan has the clearest records among them. I feel that the government should be courageous and support its national industries, pharmaceuticals and CROs being one of them.

I am not saying that we should violate agreements, but we should be strong as a low to medium income country with limited national resources. I am sure that our overseas friends would support measures that create equity, stability and sustainability. At the end of the day, what is the use of Jordan being a friend of Europe and the US if it has problems that can impact the relationship negatively and further destabilize the region?

What is it like as a Jordanian company to act in an international competitive landscape?

We have three selling points: quality – which is actually of such high levels that it surprises many partners that work with us for the first time. They do not expect a company from such a small company to serve such big pharma companies from the US and Europe. I have received amazed and impressed reactions on the fact that Triumpharma, working from Jordan with a Jordanian workforce, is able to serve drugs that have the potential to be blockbusters. The second point is speed; we are much quicker than our counterparts in the US and Europe. The third point is cost; we are nearly 50 percent cheaper than European and American counterparts, and with the cost constraints of most pharma companies today this is becoming an increasingly important asset.

Triumpharma has proven that it is on the same wavelength as the top MNCs, which further contributes to our success. Within Triumpharma we have a number of former expats that have worked in MNCs in Europe and USA, which creates confidence and trust. My clients have told me that they prefer working with me over working with Indian companies even though they might be cheaper because our communication and responsiveness is much better.

The fact that you have three patent applications behind your name is not exactly a setback either...

Seven actually – three with Merck, three with GlaxoSmithKline and one with ABAC Switzerland.

If we were to come back five years from now for the next edition of our Jordan report, to which triumphs will you have taken Triumpharma?

I would like to take Triumpharma further internationally, to turn the company to an international icon. That would require expansion into new markets and have physical presence in key countries, increasing the workforce and the operation. I would also like to spin off the formulation department into a powerhouse for new ideas and discovery.

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