Interview: AbdelAziz Shaheen – Country Manager, Pfizer Egypt and Sudan



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Country manager AbdelAziz Shaheen discusses Pfizer's current and recent investments in Egypt, which include significant contributions to the continuous education of Egyptian pharmacists and health care professionals. With 54 years history in Egypt, expanding manufacturing operations, and ambitions to see Egypt to become a production hub for Africa, Pfizer Egypt is an active participant in the development of the Egyptian healthcare sector.

As Pfizer's country manager for Egypt, what would you identify as the defining features of Egypt's pharmaceutical market?

They defining features of the Egyptian market are the dominance of the retail sector, and the very high proportion of spending on pharmaceuticals that is out of pocket. Thus, Pfizer Egypt is strongly oriented towards the retail sector, significantly more so than in many other markets, and as such we have strongly engaged with pharmacists in Egypt, as they play a critical role in the Egyptian healthcare sector. Leaving this segment of the healthcare sector without investment in education and training is not in anyone's interest, most of all the patient, and as such Pfizer has taken on the responsibility to provide some education and training for Egyptian pharmacists.

In general, Egypt's market is extremely rich across all product types, although of course there are strong affordability concerns, and as such the focus is primarily on established products. Given the

medical needs of the Egyptian people, and the emerging nature of the market, the areas receiving the most attention in terms of innovation are vaccines, oncology, and biologicals, and this is where Pfizer is focusing at present.

You mentioned pharmacists playing a critical role in the Egyptian healthcare sector; how does their responsibility differ from that of other markets?

Pharmacists in Egypt carry a heavy responsibility in terms of patient safety. As such, they must have good knowledge about drug interactions, the appropriateness of the prescribed dosages. To fully uphold this responsibility, pharmacists in Egypt need to have a strong level of knowledge, and support for continuous development and education. While Egypt doesn't have many clinical pharmacies or clinical pharmacists outside of a few select hospitals, our goal is to help raise the expertise of Egyptian pharmacists towards that of the typical clinical pharmacist in other parts of the world, where they can have a well informed and respected opinion about the drug-drug interaction, the mix of products, the dosages, and the usage of the medication, for a variety of patients being either elderly or young.

What is Pfizer doing to support the professional development of pharmacists in Egypt?

Pfizer is responsible for a variety of educational programs for pharmacists, physicians, and healthcare system administrators in Egypt. One of our key investments in this area is the National Training Institute (NTI), which we jointly developed with the Egyptian government in the mid 2000s, investing roughly USD 5.5 million. Through the NTI and our current pharmacy academy programs, Pfizer provides continuous education for pharmacists, with specialized units for different disease areas, therapy types, and treatment modalities, and Pfizer helps to keep Egypt's pharmacists informed of the latest medical and pharmaceutical developments by inviting and hosting international speakers for various events.

The Egyptian healthcare sector as a whole must collaborate to support pharmacists' education; who are your key partners and collaborators?

At the top of the list is the Egyptian Pharmacists Syndicate, and we communicate with them on a continuous basis and cooperate to resolve a wide variety of problems. Next are the owners of major pharmacy chains, and then of course Egyptian medical specialists and key opinion leaders, who also play a key role in educating Egyptian pharmacists.

Since 2010, when you joined the Egyptian affiliate, what have been some of the key decisions and accomplishments that Pfizer has made?

Accomplishments:

- Celebrating the 50th anniversary of Pfizer in Egypt (2011) confirming Pfizer's commitment to the Egyptian Market during a tough time and turbulent market position
- Chairing the ESPR (Egyptian Society Of Pharmaceutical Research) representing PhRMA in Egypt since 2012
- Becoming a board member of the local industrial chamber of Pharmaceutical

Decisions:

- Aligning Pfizer Egypt's mission & vision with Pfizer Global; one which is "working together for a healthier world", that needed to be worked out across all the organization with clear metrics, close monitoring and follow up
- Planning and executing well-tailored training & development progress which is addressing all colleagues' needs and also fits with market dynamics and changes during the last 4 years

On the investment side, Pfizer has significantly increased its manufacturing capabilities here in Egypt. Five years ago, our production capabilities were limited to solid dosage forms; since then, we have developed a new semi-solids production line and hired and trained staff to work in this area, which represents a marginal investment of USD 10 million. At present, Pfizer is further investing in our Egyptian facility to establish a non-sterile liquids production line, at a cost of EGP 30 million (USD 3.75 million), and this production line should be operational by the end of 2016, or early 2017. Furthermore, we will also be making a significant investment of EGP 70 million (USD 8.75 million) over the next year to construct our own warehouse here in Egypt.

Does Pfizer's facility currently play a role as a production hub, supplying other Pfizer affiliates in the region?

This might be possible in the near future. First, we are going to be working to attract products from other manufacturing facilities to be manufactured here in Egypt. The next step would be to begin to supply other African markets from this facility, for which we know there is adequate demand as we have received several requests to supply some African markets.

Clearly, this situation is not in Egypt's best interest, particularly given the current macroeconomic conditions and the foreign trade deficit. Egypt already has significant pharmaceutical production capacity to supply export markets with, but the domestic pricing structure makes it very difficult for products manufactured in Egypt to penetrate other markets. We are working to resolve this issue on a daily basis, and to find a new mutually agreeable solution between the industry,

government, and public where prices are still affordable for the Egyptian people. This is the discussion that we have had with successive ministers and assistants, and in general they are receptive and willing; so far there has been no official decision, but the process is moving forward and I am confident that the situation will be resolved before too long.

Looking towards the future, what is your strategy for developing the affiliate?

Established products will continue to play a crucial role in our affiliate's growth, but we will also be giving careful attention as to how we can grow the footprint of Pfizer's global innovative portfolio here in Egypt, and we will be looking carefully at different acquisition opportunities. In terms of targets, we are currently ranked fourth among multinationals, and seventh overall within the Egyptian pharmaceutical industry, and we aim to be within the top five within the next three to five years.

In terms of the work we will have to do to achieve this, much of it relates to bringing and preparing for innovative product launches. This means working to prepare the organization for potential product launches, and preparing media for these products in collaboration with key opinion leaders. However, the more challenging task we have ahead of us is far less operational; we must help to encourage a new mindset towards innovative medicines in Egypt, because at present they are often perceived as luxury items with higher prices than established products, and the value of the innovation is not always well understood.

We have provided an educational grant for a third party to conduct pharmacoeconomics training to Ministry of Health employees for two years now. This training involves methods of reducing hospitalizations or long term medical complications for example. The response to this program has been very positive, as they are finding the information and tools that the program provides very valuable. Pfizer is a company with a long term vision for many countries, so while it may take some time for these ideas to take strong effect at the decision maker level, with 54 years of history in Egypt we are committed to supporting the advancement of the Egyptian healthcare sector as a whole, and will only be increasing our presence in this dynamic market.

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