

Zoubir Harrat - General Manager, Institut Pasteur in Algeria



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Dr. Zoubir Harrat heads the Institut Pasteur d'Algérie (IPA), after having spent most of his career with the institution. He talks of the importance to prepare for the healthcare challenges of the future, and how the only way to achieve this is through collaboration and training of future generations.

Dr. Harrat, can you please introduce the IPA to our international readers?

The IPA, created in 1894, is one of 33 members of Institute Pasteur International Network. It is a public institution with an industrial and commercial purpose, dedicated to infectious and immune diseases. The IPA's main mission lies in R&D, training, production and commercialisation. Not all Pasteur Institutes have this fourfold build, but in Algeria, we do.

We hold a monopoly on vaccines, sera and other biologics distribution in Algeria, providing the Ministry of Health, Population & Hospital Reform with these products, which brings in the financing for R&D and training. We also possess local production capabilities for human and veterinary products. In Algeria, everything is geared towards local production of high-end medicines. While the production side of our activity used to be less important than our research activity, we wanted to reinforce the link between both businesses, making research and diagnostic laboratories suppliers for our production services. This was possible because the IPA profits very much from its

status as an institute that can master all four business alleys.

Today, the IPA has 975 employees overall, 330 amongst those being scientists. The profiles we employ are very varied, ranking from veterinarians and pharmacists to physicians. This is what constitutes our strength and helps us to strive towards materializing the “one health” concept.

How has the IPA evolved over time?

Since its creation 124 years ago, the IPA has been through several evolutionary steps. Most importantly, it changed from being a purely administrative public utility institution to being recognised as an industrial and commercial establishment in 1994. This empowered our production and commercialisation activity.

However, we have seen a significant drop in production these last years, and our research efforts were equally slowed down. This was mainly due to our partners facing difficulties when entering the Algerian market. This is when we took the decision to return the IPA to its former glory of a research centre, that goes far beyond being a mere import institution.

We henceforth revived our biotechnology capabilities and developed more cooperation with other institutions under the authority of the Ministry of Health, Population & Hospital Reform such as the National Centre for Toxicology (CNT), the National Laboratory for Pharmaceutical Products Control (LNCPP), the Centre for Pharmacovigilance & Materiovigilance (CNPM), and the newly created National Agency for Pharmaceutical Products (ANPP). We therefore look confidently towards the future.

What is still needed to help achieve the IPA's aforementioned goals?

I think the IPA has to regain its place in the national and international space by moving forward more boldly. A lot of progress has been made in recent years in terms of production line improvement for instance.

To this end, we underwent several changes, and it is my role to help consolidate the vision, by building on our achievements. I consider that building out past achievements and at the same time reorganising is the best method for success. We have already started on a partial reorganisation of our excellence and reference centres. We strive to augment their efficiency and ensure their full operability and we have made good progress in that regard. This is achieved through adopting quality management systems that respond to ISO norms.

We are also eager to pursue a more intensive quality of supervision work, optimising the production of biologics that we are responsible for.

How can the IPA encourage local production of vaccines?

We have seen this diminish in last years, simply because the equipment we work with is outdated and has to be renewed and modernised. We have already started on that process, prioritising those areas we see posing the most important public health issues. Scorpion sting sera is one such area, in which we want to enhance our performance to be sure to tackle the challenges it poses, such as matching the quantity required. The demand is currently too high for us to meet, and we have hence put in place a new unit to address this.

Shortages of vaccines have sometimes challenged Algeria. How do you ensure you meet requirements in quality, quantity and flow?

Providing vaccines is an essential part of our mission. Currently, we distribute to all vaccination centres in Algeria, and they are all well covered. Overall, we are in charge of 92 percent of the distribution. For two years in a row now, we have been able to maintain the flow with no interruption and no reclamation: we keep on improving our stance.

One way of achieving this was to engage in three-year agreements on delivery with our suppliers, which allow us to move away from the risky yearly contracts we had before. We have established clear procedures and timelines we work towards. This establishment of a real strategy helped us overcome past challenges.

What is the IPA's contribution in overseeing epidemiology in Algeria?

We have important expertise in that domain thanks to our reference centres as well as the fact that we take part in almost every health project launched. Malaria control as well as insecticides-resistance control are important tasks. We are also very active in tuberculosis diagnostic and work closely with regional laboratories in this area. Furthermore, we have helped establish flu and respiratory disease centres, setting standards for the whole continent.

A recent example came with an outbreak of measles this year, rapidly identified through genotyping by the IPA. We are also involved on research programmes for emerging viruses such as Dengue and Chikungunya. The IPA is amongst the Institut Pasteur International Network taskforce

for outbreaks surveillance, and we sit on all national supervision committees.

How would you describe your relationship with the private sector?

We entered into a collaboration agreement with the public industrial group Sidal and the multinational company Sanofi Pasteur a while ago that has developed into a deep and successful public-private partnership we are extremely proud of. It lays in everyone's interest to develop this sort of agreements; they pose the context to good scientific cooperation. Although ambitious, this first project is coming along very well, and we pursue with it a perspective of providing Algerians with vaccines of good quality avoiding future shortages.

These types of collaborations are very important for us and the country and will one day allow for technology transfer, a founding stone for the future. And we will allocate every means possible to ensure the success of our endeavour.

What are the immediate priorities you pursue so that the IPA can fulfil its role in the Algerian health system?

One of our main priorities has to be in forming tomorrow's specialists. We have to ensure that our generation will be followed by one just as qualified, so education and training are at the very top of our priority list. We will continue to maintain an important stream of investment in professions around pharmacy and biology, but also continue to encourage talent in production and quality management.

In order to be ready to meet the healthcare challenges of the future, we have to build up the right partnerships. Luckily, Algeria has a great infrastructure potential, and we are wooing for investments in different production centres, be it reagents, diagnostic kits or biologics.

The IPA holds a very important position in the Algerian health system, and we will continue to hold it. This will be achieved through strengthening our regional affiliates, reinforcing their capacity to answer the needs the region express. We share a vision with the Pasteur Institutes in Tunisia, Morocco and Iran to build up a leading association called MATI (Morocco-Algeria-Tunisia-Iran) within the wider Middle-East & Africa region. The key is to be aligned, we have no space for sole missions. Many challenges such as climatic change, diseases outbreaks, and medicines resistance concern us all, and only together will we be able to tackle them.

As IPA, we are also looking to reinforce our response capacity to the needs of the Ministry of Health, Population & Hospital Reform in terms of specific testing, for both infectious diseases and allergies for instance. Early cancer detection is also on our list, as the fight against cancer is an important topic in Algeria. Early testing is our responsibility.

What role do you see for the IPA of the future?

We want to increase our international visibility. I think that for now, the IPA does not participate enough in research projects from other institutions, and we are in the process of reinforcing this. The Middle-East & Africa region is one axis we develop this in, especially around fight and prevention of regionally common diseases such as Rabies and Leishmaniasis. In general, we have reached a real level of collaboration on mosquito-transmittable diseases. Within a Horizon 2020 outlook, we have much more projects under way, also with the EU.

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