Mehdi Ferdjioui – General Manager North West Africa, GE Healthcare, Algeria



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Mehdi Ferdjioui, GM for North West Africa at GE Healthcare explains the importance of his region to the global group and how GE's innovative medtech solutions plug into helping solve some of Algeria's most pressing healthcare needs.

Could you introduce GE Healthcare and the importance of the Algerian subsidiary within the region?

GE Healthcare became the first medical devices company to establish direct operations in Algeria in 2008. In fact, we celebrated our 10-year anniversary in March of this year. Today, we have 160 employees in Algeria, 50% are dedicated to services, spread across our headquarters in Algiers, and regional offices in Oran and Constantine. GE Healthcare has been growing rapidly for the past 3 years: our operations have more than doubled in size, and the country has become the hub for the Maghreb region with more than 4 000 equipment installed. Part of our success is due to the GE group's deep-rooted ties with Algeria.

How is GE Healthcare addressing the most pressing issues of the Algerian healthcare system?

The country is in the midst of an epidemiological shift from infectious diseases to non-communicable chronic conditions. The incidence of cancers, cardiovascular pathologies and degenerative diseases is on the rise. GE Healthcare has helped tackle this issue in a number of ways. Firstly, we chose to prioritize proximity which enables us to deliver our whole range of products everywhere in Africa, as well as the associated support services. We have dedicated local sales, training and maintenance teams for each product category. What's more, all the equipment systems offered by GE Healthcare at the group level are also available in Algeria, everything from simple ECGs to complex cyclotron particle accelerators. Indeed, we provided the very first PET Scan in Algeria, which will impact the number of Algerian patients who must go abroad to perform these scans and incur heavy expenses in the process. We also delivered the very first cyclotron in Algeria to a private hospital in Tizi Ouzou (Chahids Mahmoudi Hospital) and are going to inaugurate in the coming months the first cyclotron in a public hospital. This is no small matter as this event is ushering in a new "molecular era" in the diagnosis and treatment of cancers. Thanks to these investments, doctors will be able to follow the evolution of tumours and target radiation of cancerous cells. All the countries that made these investments have seen a significant reduction in mortality rates.

Another trend in Algeria is the increasing medical needs in provincial areas. Because the government has invested in local infrastructure (roads, housing, hospitals) in provinces outside Algiers, people were incentivized to settle down in these regions. As a result, medical needs have increased there, and GE Healthcare has positioned itself to answer them by allocating resources regionally, including in remote areas. Thanks to these efforts, all public hospitals, military hospitals and oncology centres in Algeria are equipped with GE systems.

Nowadays, GE Healthcare owns 59% of healthcare equipment market share in the country[1]. Of course, this level of integration with the healthcare system presumes existence of local back-office resources for training and maintenance. In particular, we have a responsibility to keep up a permanent inventory of spare parts for equipment. In order to meet these requirements, we have invested by localizing USD 3 million in a spare parts stock managed through a digital platform, recruited field service engineers and formed partnerships with local universities to source young engineers. Regarding training of healthcare professionals, we have 9 experts in clinical education for costly and complex machines, such as MRI and scanners, in order to optimize their use by medical staff. We have also opened an Advanced Applications Centre dedicated to training healthcare professionals since 2013. We also organize regular events on specific technologies; for example, we train 50 people every weekend all year on our dual ultrasound systems, and we are also partnering with Scientific Societies in continuing training in several care areas such as

oncology and cardiology, in order to improve patient's outcomes. This emphasis on proximity and continuous training is in line with the goals laid out by the government's Cancer Plan and the new Sanitary Law introduced this year.

Speaking of the Sanitary Law, one of its emphasis is on digitalization. How do you assess the government's willingness to better integrate the different parts of the healthcare system through digital initiatives, and what are some of your digital solutions?

The government has made clear that going up this digitalization ladder is one of its priorities and is working on it.

For example, under the National Cancer Plan, public tenders were launched that clearly go in this direction.

Today, Digital allows improving imaging performance, workflow optimization and clinical collaboration enhancement, as well as services; for example, we have a team dedicated to managing remote fix maintenance, as 30% of maintenance operations are done remotely (90% of our installed based is connected).

In addition, Digital Healthcare solutions are intended to be of particular benefit to health facilities because they can create collaborative care networks, reduce up to 20% of storage costs and optimize images archiving. They also provide an opportunity for radiologists to save up to 19% of their working time.

Globally, there is a lack of radiologists compared to medical needs which contributes to the outsourcing of radiography analysis from developed countries to developing countries. This tool can be used to bridge this gap internationally but can also be used to pool resources in one country.

Digitalization will bring collaborative platforms that enable hospitals to resolve complex cases that they cannot treat with the resources available to them. GE Healthcare has built a platform called GE Cares where doctors can stay up to date with the latest clinical trends, get access to training on new techniques and share information on cases with colleagues in their respective fields, and this platform has been launched in Algeria this year as a pilot for Africa and can be used by our partners.

You have quite a unique professional background, having worked both in the pharmaceutical and medical devices fields. How has your experience in pharma shaped the way you do business in the medtech sector?

Apart from pharma, the evolution of therapeutics is also of great interest to me because GE Healthcare is at the forefront of precision health. Precision health is about using personal genetic, biological and bacteriological data and link them to medical images, another form of data, to provide individualized healthcare. Generally, everything is becoming data and as they say in healthcare “data is gold”. My background in biology allows me to see the bigger picture and the links between the pharma and medtech sectors, and the ways to make each other collaborate with each other. Interestingly, GE Healthcare signed a global partnership this year with Roche Diagnostics, the leader in in-vivo and in-vitro diagnostics. The reason for this partnership is a no-brainer: medical imagery combined with biological diagnostics will give a much more complete picture of organs by layering together the physiological structure and molecular mechanisms.

What are goals you would like to achieve in the next 5 years?

In the next 5 years, GE Healthcare technologies will enable earlier intervention to better manage diseases and aim to improve mortality rates. For these conditions, the key to save people is to be able to intervene within the hour. By 2022, there will be a lot more centres equipped with GE Healthcare technologies and located less than an hour away from patients which will improve access to health care for all.

Also, and as mentioned previously, Digital is one of the drivers that will support the healthcare sector and improve patient experience and outcomes.

We aim to use the latest technologies such as AI, with data from across our portfolio, to create information to improve patient care in a more targeted and individualized manner.

A concrete example, is the launch during RSNA 2018, of new applications and smart devices built on Edison, a platform that helps accelerate the development and adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology and empowers providers to deliver faster, more precise care. Edison is part of GE Healthcare’s $1 billion and growing Digital portfolio and will serve as a “digital thread” for its existing AI partnerships and products. Clinical partners will use Edison to develop algorithms, and technology partners will work with GE Healthcare to bring the latest advancements in data

processing to Edison applications and smart devices. In emerging markets, such as Algeria, health systems are often able to adopt new technologies more quickly because they are not hampered by existing infrastructures.

Our digital journey is well underway and we feel we have not only a strong vision for the future but we also have tangible offerings today.

To conclude, what message would you like to address to our readership?

First, I would like to stress the importance of being as close as possible to healthcare professionals and help them treat their patients better through training, not just new products and technologies. Secondly, the industry needs to think about sustainable strategies that consider the interests of all stakeholders. Finally, we should look towards the future that, in my opinion, lies in precision and individualized healthcare for all.

[1] COSIR, Q3, YTD 2018

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