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28.06.2021

Tags: Saudi Arabia, Pfizer, Strategy, Saudization, Vaccines, Access

Mohamed Fawzy highlights how Pfizer's work in Saudi Arabia dovetails with the country's ambitious 'Vision 2030' transformation strategy, the Saudi market's increasing relevance to the company, and how Pfizer is working for the benefit of the Saudi people on COVID-19 vaccine access and beyond.

Can you begin by introducing our audience to your career trajectory and current role?

I have dedicated my working life of 21 years to the pharmaceutical industry at multiple multinationals in the US, Dubai, and Saudi Arabia. When the opportunity arose to come back to Saudi and take on the role of Country Manager for Pfizer Saudi Arabia one year ago, I gladly accepted. It is a time of both challenges and incredible opportunities for Saudi with the implementation of Vision 2030 and the impending transformation of Saudi healthcare. I am excited about what Pfizer can bring to this landscape, along with the rest of our industry, to help the Kingdom in its transformation in general and specifically in the healthcare sector.

What does the fact that pharma multinationals are assigning Saudi country manager roles to such seasoned executives say about the importance of this market?

Saudi is home to 34 million people, which is only seven percent of the population in the Middle East & Africa (MEA) region. However, the country is the world's 17th largest economy and represents a full 22 percent of the MEA region's GDP. Healthcare expenditure stands at almost USD 50 billion and is expected to grow from 6.2 percent of GDP today to 9.5 percent by 2030, representing almost a quarter of the region's spending. There can therefore be no question that Saudi is extremely strategic in terms of size.*

Moreover, as part of the aspirational Vision 2030 plan, Saudi Arabia today is one of the top leaders in shaping the healthcare environment in the MEA region and exerting a significant influence. And being part of this exciting transformation as a country manager comes with both a burden of responsibility as well as a great deal of pride.

Many countries in the region are attempting to reduce their reliance on oil and gas and diversify their economies via 'Vision' programmes. What have been your impressions of Saudi's Vision 2030 and just how transformational might it be?

The aspirational aspect of Vision 2030 to transform Saudi toward a knowledge-based economy is something that excited us. We at Pfizer Saudi strongly believe in the value we can add when it comes to knowledge, either the simple transfer of information or the more sustainable approach in building capabilities. In simple terms, Vision 2030 is about moving the country from an oil-based economy to non-oil-based economy, but in reality, it is transforming all aspects of life here. This encompasses transformation in the country's innovation footprint, diversity, society, healthcare, and lifestyle. What is different about this Vision is the remarkable speed and agility with which the Saudi government is implementing it.

One of the key aspects of the Vision is the creation of a local manufacturing base, something that pharma multinationals are often uncomfortable with. However, Pfizer decided to go ahead with Saudi manufacturing at an early stage. When was this decision taken and what are its advantages?

Pfizer has been operating in the Kingdom for the last 60 years and proudly boasts a workforce of almost 460 employees here. In October 2011, we signed an MOU with the Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (SAGIA) for our manufacturing plant for oral solid dosage forms in King Abdullah Economic City. This state-of-the-art manufacturing and packaging facility were completed

and integrated in 2017. Pfizer Saudi manufacturing facility has been serving millions of patients across the kingdom with high quality products and just in time supply which is inline with the Kingdom direction.

How would you characterise Pfizer's approach to the Saudi market today, especially after the divestiture of its Upjohn arm? What are the company's areas of focus?

At Pfizer, all our work is fundamentally underlined by our mission to deliver breakthroughs that change patients' lives. That dictates all our work globally, including in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where for the past 60 years, we have been working with healthcare professionals, communities, and government to that end.

Simultaneously, as a global company, Pfizer is shifting from a diversified company with a consumer health portfolio and comprehensive portfolio of legacy brands to a more science-focused biopharmaceutical powerhouse. As part of that transformation, one of our core priorities is promoting innovation across our full range of therapeutic areas – oncology, vaccines, rare diseases, internal medicine, inflammation & immunology, and hospital products which is well represented locally. This innovation is coming in the way we deliver our business, the new assets we are bringing to market, and through the clinical trials that we are investigating for our pipeline.

Additionally, our efforts in the last few years along with the passion of our teams and collaboration with health authorities have helped speed up pharmaceutical product registrations, allowing us to bring our products to the patients here as early as possible; something that the country's healthcare transformation is helping make possible.

What is Pfizer's clinical trial footprint in Saudi today and what adjustments would you like to see be made to the ecosystem to ensure that Saudi clinicians are exposed to Pfizer's latest innovations and patients can get early access to treatments?

There are currently multiple clinical trial protocols (phase 2 and 3) under review, and some of them have already reached the final stages of development and approval in oncology, vaccine, public health, and gene therapy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The trial of gene therapy in Duchenne's disease at King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Centre is a key milestone and shows the increased interest in working with key centres in the Kingdom.

Pfizer has very strict guidelines for on-site and contract research organisation (CRO) partner selection for its global clinical trials. Key factors that we consider include the quality and integrity of the data that can be generated as well as the speed at which patients can be recruited.

On product launches, other Saudi stakeholders have mentioned that there is often a gap between a product receiving approval and becoming available to patients. What has your experience of launching products been?

Saudi FDA was the first authority in the region to implement verification and abridged evaluations as two new accelerated drug registration procedures with the objective to ensure fast access to new medicinal products. In addition, a fast-track product designation programme is in place which we believe is an amazing step towards addressing unmet needs. It definitely helped shorten review timelines and get innovations, into the hands of patients.

All public procurement of medications in Saudi now goes through the National Company for the Unified Purchase of Medicines, Medical Devices and Supplies (NUPCO). Are there any challenges to this setup?

Today, NUPCO is one of the biggest technology-based service providers for centralized procurement of medicine and medical devices in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the largest company of its kind in the Middle East. One of NUPCO's most important approach and philosophy is the effective and active collaboration to transform healthcare services. At Pfizer, we ensured having such collaboration for decades, and it was well demonstrated during the pandemic, where we collaborated to ensure early access to our Pfizer BioNTech vaccine to our Saudi community.

Given Pfizer's success in rolling out its vaccine in Saudi, what lessons are there to be taken from this experience?

The importance of open dialogue is a key takeaway. When partners come to the table and engage in open dialogue, mountains can be moved. As is widely known, the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine requires unique storage conditions; when the vaccine was launched the guidance was for it to be stored at -70°C±10°C. This requires every single step of the supply chain to be clearly outlined. Teams from the MoH, NUPCO, and Pfizer spent hours and hours mapping these steps, from the

moment that the vaccine leaves Belgium to its arrival at the vaccination centres in Saudi. Through this mapping we were able to anticipate every potential challenge and assign accountability. Without compromising the quality of the checkpoints, these three teams came up with very innovative solutions to ensure that all challenges would be overcome. Being part of this three-way open dialogue and executing this complex but vital task was a proud moment in my life.

In which areas in particular might we see more progress in Saudi via increased open dialogue?

As part of Vision 2030, and the speed and agility by which the Saudi government is adapting, we are seeing an increased engagement in dialogue with partners. Pfizer is officially and more frequently invited to talk about different topics with different Ministries as well as other stakeholders such as NUPCO and the Local Content & Government Procurement Authority (LCGPA).

Moreover, the Saudi National Competitive Centre has launched the public consultation platform istitlaa.ncc.gov.sa which is considered a best practice. Dialogue, not only with key stakeholders in the brainstorming phase but with the public on any change in laws and regulation that may impact them, is growing in importance. This learning journey will pay dividends for Saudi as it transforms towards Vision 2030.

Pfizer is having a big impact in Saudi in terms of vaccines, with widespread adherence to Prevnar for children and the COVID vaccine rollout well underway as well. In which other areas would you like to see Pfizer have a similar impact?

As part of Vision 2030, the Saudi MOH identified specific disease areas such as diabetes, Obesity, Cardiovascular and smoking cessation, we at Pfizer Saudi are continuously exploring opportunities to partner with Saudi MOH in areas that can serve the country’s medical priorities. One of the areas we have been playing an active role in is the increased diagnosis of silent diseases in rare diseases, Oncology and Cardiovascular diseases. Cardiomyopathy and atrial fibrillations are examples that could be silent killers, so we want to get these patients diagnosed at the earliest.

Looking at the pricing question, is the Saudi system fit for purpose as is, or would bringing in a health technology assessment (HTA) be of benefit to stakeholders?

Pfizer has been invited to two workshops on the future of HTA along with other stakeholders. Engaging in open dialogue in this manner and having our opinions heard is very much valued. What is important to note is that HTA is not about pricing, but about value; a medicine's value must be evidence- and science-based.

With Vision 2030 necessitating the 'Saudization' of companies' salesforces, what has been your approach to talent acquisition, retention, and training? In which areas do Saudi staff excel and in which is there room for improvement?

First, one of our main aspirations is making Pfizer a great place to work for our approx. 460 staff in Saudi. Within that aspiration, diversity and inclusion is vital. All of Pfizer Saudi's three legal entities – the manufacturing site, scientific office, and legal trading entity – hold 'Platinum' Saudization status, meaning that we are exceeding government expectations in terms of local talent. 85 percent of staff in our customer-facing organisation are Saudi locals and, moreover, we have 60 women in our team, a number that is growing day by day. For example, our current communications lead is a female who was recently promoted from the field force, giving just one example of how we invest in female talent.

The Saudi talent pool is growing, and Pfizer is looking to invest in its own talent at an early stage. We reach out to universities, partner with them, and explain to pharmacy undergraduates our innovation-driven and patient-centric vision and mission. I am extremely proud of the talent that we have and how it has grown.

Does Pfizer have programmes in place to expose its Saudi staff to international markets?

International assignments are one of the unique development opportunities we can offer at Pfizer across the globe, including Saudi. I believe developing talent is a journey that involves all manner of steps, from training to exposure, mentorship assignments, secondments, job rotation, and understanding people's capabilities and limitations. I am extremely proud of my colleagues in HR who understand and enjoy this journey. We are keen to provide a tailored development plan for all our talents in Saudi

In these transformational times for both Pfizer and Saudi, where do you hope to take the affiliate in the next few years?

With the effective and continuous collaboration with Saudi governance bodies and health care sector to leverage our footprint in Pfizer, we will be able to continue delivering breakthroughs that can change millions of patients' lives in Saudi Arabia.

* *Source: BMI Q4 Report, Country Risk Report & GDP By Expenditure Outlook, Pharmaceuticals & Healthcare SWOT & KSA Budget Statement – Fiscal Year 2021*

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