Zeina Sfeir Lahoud – GM, Biologix



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Biologix is a Dubai-based firm that represents international pharma companies by bringing innovative drugs to market in the Middle East / North Africa (MENA) region. Its GM, Zeina Sfeir Lahoud, discusses the company's presence in over 17 countries, their 25 years of experience in Saudi Arabia, and the dynamics shaping the largest market in the region, including the fast regulatory approval process in place. With value-based healthcare an increasingly hot topic, she explains how Biologix has moved to sign the first risk-sharing agreement with Saudi Arabia

for a spinal muscular atrophy product; the first in the MENA region.

Can you begin by introducing your career and how you started working in the life sciences industry?

I am a Pharm D graduate with a specialized degree in industrial pharmacy acquired from Belgium in addition to an executive MBA at ESA – ESCP / EAP.

With 24 years of experience in the pharmaceutical industry, I have held different leadership positions in multinationals & Biologix in emerging markets & Middle East and lately was appointed as GM of Biologix located in Dubai.

Understanding that Biologix does not develop its own products, what is your place in the MENA markets and what is your value proposition for pharma companies?

Biologix represents multinational pharmaceutical manufacturers by bringing innovative drugs to market in MENA. Positioned across over 17 key strategic locations in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Egypt, North Africa, and the Levant, we are pioneers in regional distribution and promotion of innovative products and solutions for difficult-to-treat diseases.

In terms of our value proposition, we create solid regional success for pharma companies' assets, taking innovative products and turning them into market leaders. Our primary focus in terms of therapeutic areas is onco-haematology, immunology, rare diseases and cardiovascular disease.

We provide end-to-end services from the pre-registration phase to medical and disease awareness activities, registration, promotion, cold-chain distribution, tender management, market access programs, pharmacovigilance, and product safety, as well as the administration of risk management plans.

Given the nature of the challenging diseases our products treat, our main focus is on scientific awareness, increasing diagnosis levels, and helping companies through early access programs and fast registration to save and enhance patients' lives.

MENA is quite dynamic, with rapid growth and a huge level of diversity. The region includes some of the fastest-growing economies in the world, providing it with opportunities for growth and untapped potential. It is definitively an opportunity because there is the political will to provide the population with quality healthcare. Countries here are constantly updating their regulations in terms of registration, centralized procurement, access, and compliance.

Taking into account the fact that many Big Pharma companies already have their own infrastructure in the region, what is the profile of the partners you seek to collaborate with?

We began in 1997 with a medium-sized innovative multinational company that became one of the big pharma today. We maintain active long-term collaborations and sustainable partnerships with pharmaceutical companies at every level, from small startups to multinational corporations. We are open and are capable of collaborating with any type of pharma company offering innovative & differentiated products.

Moving to Saudi Arabia, how important is the market for Biologix and what is the scope of your presence there?

Biologix has been in Saudi Arabia for almost 25 years and we are continuing to evolve alongside the country. Saudi is a dynamic, well-organized, and innovation-friendly market. It has the largest economy in the MENA region, a G20 economy, with a growing population with many opportunities. The SFDA is a regulatory leader in the region and Saudi serves as a point of entry for other MENA markets.

The opportunities are heightened by the leadership in the country and its Vision 2030; it encourages investment and favours private partnerships. It is the largest market in MENA with a G20 economy. Both public and private institutions have well-defined processes and today Saudi is experiencing an increased demand for prescription treatments.

The health authority has defined a clear strategy focused on a transparent and evolving regulatory environment. In terms of challenges, we are taking a close look at the cost-containment measures, localization efforts, Saudization, the establishment of economic centres and the effective centralized purchasing body, NUPCO. Generally, the tendency is to reduce the importation of brands and enhance localization.

How does Saudi Arabia fit into Biologix's launch strategies? Is it regularly the first country on your list?

Saudi Arabia is the first country for many brands but launching a product first requires registration. Fortunately, most of our products go through the fast-track registration pathway. As soon as we register, we launch in Saudi but also look at the UAE and Lebanon because of their speedy approval processes.

As I mentioned, the Saudi Vision 2030 has a focus on local manufacturing, but fortunately our products complement what the local industry is offering. The competition that exists today, with the presence of both multinationals and local companies, is pushing everyone to create innovative solutions and you can observe it in the access and patient support programs; I feel that there is healthy competition in the market.

What has been the impact of the Saudization mandate on the company and how do you evaluate the opportunities it can bring to people in the country?

The Saudization strategy has been helpful in providing new opportunities to people that otherwise would be left out of the industry. Today, we have more Saudi colleagues inside the team than ever before. This enhances diversity especially since we have used Saudization as an opportunity to have more females working within the team plus Saudi ladies are assertive, know what they want, and are ready for the challenge.

We have also been complying in partnership with our local distributor; our aim is to have a balance between men and women not only in our Saudi team but across all the markets where we compete.

Considering the organization's size and presence in Saudi, are you concerned about big multinational companies attracting the best talent?

As an entity, we have long been talent builders for technical positions; we have great people in our scientific office as well as in external affairs, regulatory, and marketing. Indeed, the demand for talent is increasing and, hence, our strategy is to continue developing people and building capabilities, exposing our people to relevant knowledge and opportunities. Biologix is well-equipped to provide growth opportunities for its employees within the organization; people can move both between departments and countries.

Many of the industry's trends are out of our control so our focus has to be on creating an inspirational company culture, where a diverse group of people grow and launch their careers. Our management team is permanently working on retaining the talents.

What is the brand recognition that Biologix enjoys with Saudi stakeholders?

Biologix is well known by all the stakeholders in the country. We have a strong representation in the market and are enlarging our infrastructure. The industry and authorities recognize the innovative solutions that our company has brought for over two decades; we are partnering with multiple distributors, the medical community, and authorities.

We have a long history of engaging with the MoH, Saudi FDA, healthcare community and multinational partners by enhancing disease awareness which is particularly important when you

deal with specialized disease areas. The organization has played an important role in increasing diagnosis and bringing healthcare solutions for patients.

To provide an example of our approach, we signed the first risk-sharing agreement in Saudi Arabia, which was also the first in the Middle East and Africa for Spinal muscular atrophy; the agreement was implemented at the beginning of 2021.

Biologix has a multidisciplinary approach that fosters an environment where different specialties work together to support patients; that means neurologists, endocrinologists, physiotherapists and psychologists collaborating.

We have also implemented a risk-management plan for several products in Saudi Arabia which has helped us have a dominant position in multiple sclerosis (MS) and multiple myeloma (MM).

Looking at recent US FDA drug approvals, the majority of therapies were not initially developed by multinational companies but rather by smaller biotech companies. Looking towards the future, is Biologix looking to collaborate with smaller biotech companies to bring their products to the region?

Absolutely. We are working with growing companies that offer specific products. Many of our upcoming launches in the Middle East and Africa come from such companies, particularly for rare diseases but also for hematology and immunology.

To conclude, what is your message to your colleagues in Saudi and companies around the world that do not currently have the MEA region as a priority?

I want to reiterate Biologix’s value proposition. We are taking great care of the assets we have from our current partners but are always searching for new assets that can help patients in the region and allow those products to become market leaders. In order for the company to continue helping partners succeed in the region, we must continue building trust by properly communicating considering the dynamic markets in which we operate. In this region, everyone should be conscious of risk mitigation, and we excel at that.

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