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Head of the Algerian National Laboratory for the Control of Pharmaceutical Products (LNCPP), an institution he helped found in 1995, Abdelaziz Gharbi describes the LNCPPâ??s journey, his great motivation to see international collaboration grow, and the role that Algeria can play in a context of regional influence.

Last year saw the establishment of the National Agency for Pharmaceutical Products (ANPP). How does its role and that of the LNCPP harmonize?

The two bodies are part of the same institution: the Ministry of Health. The LNCPP covers the technical aspects of the control, while the ANPP is in charge of the regulatory side. It handles import authorizations as well as the establishment of registration decisions. In short, it takes care of the entire administrative dimension of drugs. I think that the LNCPP and the ANPP complete each other very well, and all we do is in close collaboration with the General Directorate for Medicines. Rather than disrupting our institution, the ANPP allowed a reorganization.

What priorities were set for your term as the head of LNCPP?

I am actually one of the founders of LNCPP. After studying pharmacy, I worked at Blida University Hospital. So I left the LNCPP in 2014, but I came back in 2017. A homecoming, in a way. For me, it was a decision that fit very well into the logical continuity of my career. I see my mission in developing new directions for the LNCPP, while continuing to improve what has already been established in the past. It is the LNCPPâ??s duty to bring something extra into the drug industry.

How does the LNCPP continue to adapt to the constant changes in the pharmaceutical industry?

I think that our ability to evolve, I would even say our proactive attitude towards change, has allowed us to take on every obstacle, even before we really identify them as problematic. In 1994, we adapted to the opening of the market, and have since continued constant efforts to upgrade to international standards. Since then, our efforts have been repeatedly and visibly successful. The LNCPP led to the withdrawal of certain drugs following non-compliance analyzes that had been undertaken. And this on the international level! The LNCPP is now a collaborating center of the WHO, working on compliance standards. To do this, we have of course all the equipment and the staff with the appropriate training. International collaboration allows us to move faster in this endeavor, and we are putting in place a whole process for the control of biologic drugs.

What are the next steps that the LNCPP must take to maintain such an excellent level of service?

We are fortunate that the Algerian State provides us with all the necessary resources, not only to allow us to maintain our level, but also to constantly continue on our path of improvement and evolution. Any obstacle can be overcome. Whether itâ??s a technique that we need to master or a discussion in principle, we always find a solution. Especially when it comes to the mastery of techniques, we have always been able to count on a collaborative spirit on the part of the manufacturers. Regarding biosimilars, this will be a novelty as long as there are no established international standards. It is our duty to put in place the regulations that will anticipate future international requirements. We recently sent a team to Argentina to inspire us to establish an industry of biosimilars. The goal is a transfer of technology that will allow us to be up-to-date and to follow or even anticipate future developments in this area. Obviously, it is essential to maintain such levels of international oversight in the future. We are also fighting against a rigorous and effective fight against counterfeit medicines. Local laboratories are to be approved and regularly audited. This is how we maintain quality levels. In 2004, for the first time, we were alerted to a regional risk, since counterfeiting now affected drugs. As a result, the Ministry of Health and the LNCPP put stringent regulations in place and established batch-by-lot control of imported medicines.

What is the role of Algeria in a context of influence at the continental level?

In the immediate neighboring countries, Tunisia and Morocco, there are fewer producers and they are more subject to partial state control. In Algeria, we have developed a much larger pharmaceutical industry. Recently, we have been contacted by Mauritania and Sudan to support them in their efforts to set up a national control laboratory. With Tunisia, we have a long history of very good collaboration in the control of medicines. I think that Algeria really has the opportunity to establish itself as a leader in the development of standards in terms of control in Africa.

The LNCPP has played a historic role in the development of the Algerian pharmaceutical industry. How does the LNCPP operate within its partnerships with the pharmaceutical companies?

Indeed, we consider ourselves a partner to the industry, in close collaboration with the various actors present in Algeria. We provide our technical assistance and, since the international opening of the

Algerian market, we have provided advice and quality control to the laboratories. The quality control techniques we developed are useful for setting up manufacturing units. In addition, we assist the laboratories and train the quality control staff of the companies, ultimately adapting their level to the required standards. Demand is important today, particularly in microbiology and pharmaco-toxicology.

The Algerian government has announced that it wants to reach 70 percent coverage of Algerian consumption with drugs produced by local companies. What do you think of such a project?

I think it is very important to encourage the export of Algerian medicines: why would we be the only country not to have an export activity? Once local consumption is satisfied, we must work in collaboration with all the actors, to ensure a strong place abroad.

What is your strategic vision for the times to come?

In the short term, we need to work to improve our achievements. It is essential that we continue to develop our technical mastery, while gradually adapting it to the needs of the future such as the production of biological drugs. Our industry is subject to constant change, and we must at all costs avoid resting on our laurels.

In the longer term, we want to tackle the maintenance of quality. In an international context of malfunction and counterfeiting, we must remain vigilant. This vigilance implies a focus on the control of chemical raw material, the backbone of traditional pharmaceuticals. We continue our efforts in international collaboration, in congresses such as Euro-Mediterranean meetings.

What was your most challenging moment in your career?

It was extremely difficult for me to leave the LNCPP in 2014. I am very grateful to be back today, and even though the workload is important, our dreams are worth sacrificing. We have an incredible team at LNCPP, bringing exceptional motivation every day and supporting me in my beliefs.

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