

Ayman El Deeb – Cluster Head, Astellas Egypt



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Ayman El Deeb, cluster head of Astellas Egypt, highlights how the Egyptian affiliate of Astellas has been performing since its establishment five years ago. He also discusses the need for better patent protection in the country and explains how Astellas is contributing to the country's reform of the

healthcare system.

You have been in charge of Astellas Egypt since its establishment in 2014 as part of the MENA region. Could you give us an overview of the Egyptian affiliate and highlight what have been your main achievements?

To be closer to the medical community and to better serve the needs of all our stakeholders, Astellas established a regional presence in 2014 by setting up the Regional HQ in Dubai, UAE. I was appointed to lead Astellas growth in Egypt.

We started with two products and 27 employees. Proudly during the last four years we have created 22 new employment opportunities and registered five products, three of them are oncology products to treat prostate cancer and haematological malignancies.

Patient focus is at the core of decision making at Astellas, ensuring that our innovative products are available to HCPs and the Egyptian patients has been, and still is, the main objective. We are a global pharmaceutical company and our strength is in Oncology, Urology, Transplantation and Anti-Infectives therapeutic areas. Registering five products over four years is great, and we do look forward to registering the future pipeline products that will address unmet patient needs.

Financially the operations in Egypt has been very successful; we have posted a five-fold growth since 2014 without considering the devaluation of the local exchange rate and even with the currency devaluation, we were still able to grow our turnover by 15 to 20 percent a year due to new product launches. To continue this positive development, we are continuously adapting our organizational structure. I am very pleased that now the regulatory, finance, medical affairs and marketing are all managed by the colleagues who are based here in Cairo, where our customers and patients are.

Considering the difficult political and economic situation in 2014, what rationales convinced the global HQ to set up an office in Egypt five years ago?

Patient focus is at the core of decision making at Astellas, hence the regional operations where established to better serve the needs of all our stakeholders. Being a corporate organization, the financial justification was needed, Egypt is one of the biggest markets in the Middle East and has the region's largest population, which makes it a big volume market – between 35 percent and 40 percent of all pharmaceutical units in the region are sold in Egypt. Though we do have one of the lowest averages per unit prices in the world – USD 1.2 – hence the Egyptian pharma market represents only seven to 12 percent of the value market in the region. This makes it harder for MNC who provide specialized medications to establish a profitable presence. Nevertheless, our HQ understand that importance of our medications to be available to patients in need and see the potential of the Egyptian market.

Given the pricing pressures we have seen in the last three years, how do you ensure your commitment to Egyptian patients by avoiding drug shortages, while also keeping up with the growth targets set by the HQ?

Our vision at Astellas is to turn innovative science into value for patients. Understanding the economics of the region, we are very well aware that affordability is an issue and hence our priority is to ensure accessibility and reasonable pricing for all our products. With all the challenges we may face, these two priorities will not change. The profit and value of the Egyptian market for our global operations are still small, so in my view, it really reflects the vision of Astellas of bringing affordable medicine to people in need.

During the time of the currency devaluation, we faced additional challenges and I am really pleased that we were able to supply the medications to patients in need without any shortage; this was largely due to the strong partnership we have, especially with our local distributor.

As a young affiliate, you are continuously introducing new products. How easy is it to bring innovative products to the Egyptian market?

Currently, we have three products being registered in Egypt, two of which are oncology products. Over the last 4 years, the product registration process has improved and it is fairly smooth.

One of the big issues in Egypt is weak patent protection laws. This makes the market less attractive for the MNCs. I believe a joint effort is needed in this area by both the MNCs and the government to improve legislation on this topic. In my experience, I have seen a generic being launched in the market prior to the innovative product, which is not the case in the majority of the world.

What would you highlight as the most interesting developments and initiatives launched as a result of the government's focus on healthcare?

A key reform by the government has been the introduction of universal health insurance, which is a great step to enhance the current system. The program will be implemented step by step with clear target percentages, starting off in smaller cities to then expand it to all regions of the country. I am very confident that the reform will facilitate access to healthcare for Egyptians. Prerequisites for changing the healthcare system are well-trained staff and resources, to improve regulatory and pricing mechanisms.

Considering your diverse product portfolio, what role do you want to see Astellas to playing in the coming years when it comes to fostering healthcare improvement in Egypt?

At Astellas our ethos is 'Changing Tomorrow' and we work in many areas to support patients, doctors, the medical community and aim to be a valuable contributor to the Egyptian society.

Our key contribution to patient wellbeing is through developing and ensuring access to effective medications. We also work closely with medical societies contributing to improving the level of patient care through doctor education: a combination of seminars with international experts and preceptorships at leading global institutions. We also support the patient-centric initiatives organized by local medical societies and patient organizations.

In March we will be hosting a Regional Oncology and Hematology meeting with several renowned international speakers here in Egypt and we are also happy to support the CanSurvive on the great patient-centric initiatives that they have been working on.

Where would you like to see Astellas Egypt in five years?

We have doubled our headcount already and we hope to continue the same growth trajectory. We are excited about the move to our new offices soon.

Currently, Astellas is among the Top 25 MNCs in Egypt and I would like to see us climbing up the rankings. We will continue to bring innovative products that are addressing unmet patients' needs and I would like to see our ranking in the Top 10 Oncology companies globally to be reflected in Egypt as well.

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