

Basel Al-Qahtani - General Manager, Boston Scientific Saudi Arabia



We are dedicated to helping the country achieve its healthcare transformation objectives by bringing innovative technologies to the market, leveraging our global expertise, and partnering with key healthcare institutions

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Basel Al-Qahtani, General Manager of Boston Scientific Saudi Arabia, discusses how Boston Scientific has expanded its operations to establish a fully fledged regional headquarters in the kingdom. He outlines the company's commitment to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 agenda through public-private partnerships and potentially through accountable care organizations, and underlines the importance of maintaining quality standards in procurement through healthcare technology assessment.

Since our [last discussion](#) in 2021, what significant milestones and achievements have occurred within Boston Scientific in Saudi Arabia?

Boston Scientific has made significant strides in enhancing our presence and operations within the country over the past few years. Given the advancements in the Saudi healthcare sector, the growing population, and the maturation of the healthcare system, our primary objective was to bring our therapies and products closer to patients. To achieve this goal, we embarked on a strategic approach to expanding our operations and bringing all supporting functions and clinical support closer to the patient.

Initially, we adopted a phased approach by onboarding three out of our six businesses in the first year. This approach allowed us to be mindful of maintaining the level of service in the market while gradually ramping up our operations. In the following year, we successfully imported the remaining portfolio, making us fully direct in the country across all businesses. This expansion encompassed various crucial functions, including clinical sales support, health economics and market access, medical affairs, and supply chain management, among others.

As a result of these initiatives, Boston Scientific has transitioned from being solely a provider of medical devices to becoming a trusted partner and advisor throughout the entire patient care pathway. Our enhanced presence and capabilities enable us to better address the evolving needs of patients and healthcare providers, ultimately contributing to advancing the level of treatment and care within the country.

In navigating the complex process of moving from relationships with distributors to establishing on-the-ground operations, what lessons have you learned, and what strategies do you recommend?

This can indeed be a delicate process. Our approach has been rooted in recognizing the mutual benefits of partnerships while aligning with the broader objectives outlined in Vision 2030. Rather than an emotional discussion, it is viewed as a natural progression in the business world, anticipated by both parties.

We are grateful for the support provided by our previous partners in advancing the healthcare system thus far. Moving forward, it is essential to maintain open communication and transparency throughout the transition, ensuring all parties understand the rationale and objectives behind the strategic shift. By emphasizing the shared goal of advancing healthcare delivery and patient outcomes and fostering a collaborative atmosphere.

What do you see as the most significant trends at play in the Saudi medtech sector today?

Saudi Arabia is currently undergoing one of the most significant transformations globally. With a primarily public healthcare market (70-80 percent), there is a concerted effort to unlock opportunities for private players to contribute and thrive. This involves initiatives such as privatizing service delivery and enhancing cluster structures to cater to various healthcare needs, from home care to specialized services.

A key aspect of this transformation is driving maturity and autonomy within healthcare clusters, implementing a profit and loss (P&L) mentality, and redefining budgeting and spending strategies. The introduction of National Health Insurance aims to incentivize accountable care organizations and promote healthy competition, ultimately improving patient experiences and addressing existing service gaps.

How do you ensure equitable access to resources and prevent disparities in service delivery?

In addressing resource allocation in healthcare, it is crucial to prioritize equitable access to services while striving for optimal patient outcomes. While there may be concerns about disparities arising from differential resource allocation, particularly favouring those already delivering better services,

the ultimate goal is to ensure that all patients receive high-quality care regardless of their location or provider.

In Saudi Arabia, with its vast geographical expanse, the challenge lies in expanding access to specialized healthcare services, especially in peripheral areas, without necessitating extensive patient travel. The goal is to enhance accessibility and specialization in such areas, ensuring that patients can receive timely and appropriate care close to home.

To achieve this, investments in digital health solutions play a pivotal role. Digital health initiatives enable healthcare providers to reach more patients efficiently, optimize resource utilization, and improve patient outcomes. For example, remote monitoring and telemedicine solutions facilitate post-discharge follow-ups and preventive care, reducing the need for unnecessary hospital visits and enhancing overall healthcare efficiency.

Moreover, fostering a culture of preventive healthcare is essential to shift the focus from treating illness to maintaining wellness. By promoting awareness and preventive measures, such as vaccination campaigns and lifestyle interventions, healthcare systems can mitigate disease burden and reduce the strain on resources, ultimately benefiting the population's health and wellbeing.

Can you tell us more about the decision to establish a regional headquarters in Saudi Arabia and the significance of this move for Boston Scientific?

Establishing a regional headquarters in Saudi Arabia has been a significant move for Boston Scientific, aligning with the government's incentivization programme in this area. This initiative facilitates closer connections between the public and private sectors, fosters diversity in the workforce, and drives business growth in Saudi Arabia.

The decision to establish a regional headquarters in Saudi Arabia was influenced by several factors. Firstly, the country's abundant talent pool, particularly its youthful population offers both quantity and quality in terms of available talent. Secondly, the high level of engagement and support from the Saudi government provides a conducive environment for multinational companies to operate and thrive. Lastly, the mature regulatory environment enables faster adoption of innovative technologies, allowing companies like Boston Scientific to bring their products to market more efficiently.

Senior leadership at Boston Scientific recognizes the strategic importance of the Saudi Arabia office and has been supportive of its establishment, helping the local team to draw upon the resources and expertise of the 48,000 people strong global company, that has been leading in the medical technology sector for more than 40 years. Given the country's young population and the projected increase in certain health conditions like cardiovascular diseases and obesity, Saudi Arabia presents an opportunity for Boston Scientific to make a positive impact on public health through its innovative medical solutions, products, and services that improve the health of patients around the world.

Overall, the establishment of a regional headquarters in Saudi Arabia reflects the company's commitment to global collaboration and leveraging its collective expertise to drive growth and innovation in the region.

How might your organization contribute to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 agenda, with substantial investments planned for healthcare infrastructure and private sector

involvement?

Boston Scientific is committed to playing a significant role in Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 agenda, particularly in advancing healthcare infrastructure and digital innovation. One key aspect of this contribution is through public-private partnerships (PPP), which are gaining traction across various sectors, including healthcare. We have already witnessed the signing of several PPP projects in healthcare, such as outsourcing radiology, indicating a growing trend in this area. Boston Scientific is open to participating in such partnerships, leveraging our expertise and resources to enhance healthcare delivery in the country.

Additionally, Boston Scientific sees immense potential in driving the adoption of accountable care organizations (ACOs), which emphasize value-based care and outcomes. By partnering with the private sector, including Boston Scientific, Saudi Arabia aims to foster a culture of value-based healthcare delivery. Our multi-product portfolio, particularly in therapeutics, positions us well to contribute to this initiative by providing innovative solutions that improve patient outcomes and contribute to the overall efficiency of the healthcare system.

Which areas of Boston Scientific's portfolio are having the biggest impact in Saudi Arabia?

Globally Boston Scientific has over 15,000 products in its portfolio and invests over USD 1.4 billion in research and development each year so the offer is always evolving. The company is a leader in various therapeutic areas, with a focus on driving value-based healthcare solutions. In the realm of cardiovascular health, one area where we have made significant strides is in the treatment of atrial fibrillation (AF). AF is a cardiac arrhythmia condition that is often underdiagnosed or undertreated often due to a limited access to skilled physicians, challenges in referral pathways, and technological limitations. Boston Scientific has introduced innovative technologies for AF management, such as our pulsed field ablation system, which has transformed patient care in this space. We are also exploring ways to improve the entire patient pathway for AF, including early detection and intervention, to better address the needs of patients and healthcare providers.

How is market access managed in Saudi Arabia today and where is there room for improvement?

Market access in Saudi Arabia, particularly in the context of tender procurement, is a multifaceted process. Currently, a significant portion of medical products are procured through the National Unified Procurement Body (NUPCO), which operates on behalf of various sectors within healthcare. NUPCO plays a crucial role in enhancing access to essential medical supplies, both in the public and private sectors.

Nevertheless, there is a growing recognition of the importance of maintaining quality standards in healthcare procurement. This is where healthcare technology assessment (HTA) comes into play. HTA evaluates the health economics benefits of adopting new and innovative technologies, ensuring that procurement decisions are not solely driven by price but also consider factors like quality and clinical outcomes.

Boston Scientific is committed to partnering with the healthcare sector and incorporating HTA to demonstrate the overall value proposition of our high-tech and innovative solutions. By showcasing the health economic benefits and clinical efficacy of our products, we aim to ensure that patients in

Saudi Arabia have access to the best possible medical technologies while also meeting the requirements of the tender procurement processes.

As a Saudi leader of a multinational affiliate, how do you approach the responsibility of being a role model for your colleagues and ensuring their growth and development?

I view the opportunities in Saudi Arabia, especially in the context of Vision 2030, as boundless for talent development. Since our inception in 2022, we have witnessed remarkable growth in our team representing eleven nationalities. This serves as evidence of our steadfast commitment to fostering diversity and inclusion within our organization. Additionally, it underscores our adherence to the Saudization policy, with Saudis comprising 46 percent of our workforce. At Boston Scientific, we are dedicated to fostering an environment where every individual can flourish and make meaningful contributions; increasing the representation of women in leadership roles has been a priority, and I'm proud of the progress we've made in this regard. Mentoring and supporting colleagues in their professional growth is paramount, and I'm dedicated to helping our team prepare for leadership positions. By leveraging diverse perspectives, we aim to deliver impactful outcomes that resonate with both the market and, most importantly, the patients our customers serve.

What message would you like to convey to our international audience regarding Boston Scientific's contribution to the healthcare landscape in Saudi Arabia?

Boston Scientific is deeply committed to addressing healthcare challenges worldwide, and our presence in Saudi Arabia is no exception. We are dedicated to helping the country achieve its healthcare transformation objectives by bringing innovative technologies to the market, leveraging our global expertise, and partnering with key healthcare institutions. Over the past few years, we have made significant strides in improving accessibility to innovative medical technologies and establishing strong partnerships. Moving forward, we are focused on executing our plans to further enhance healthcare delivery and positively impact patient outcomes in the region.

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