

Boehringer Ingelheim Algeria â?? Sofiane Achi, Country Manager



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The general manager of BI Algeria discusses how Algeria could benefit from participating in international clinical trials and describes how his company is adapting its offering to mirror the changing health profile of the nation which is currently undergoing a transition from infectious and transmissible disease to chronic and lifestyle illnesses.

How would you describe the main tenets of Boehringer Ingelheimâ??s strategy for the Algerian market?

There are many factors which indicate that the Algerian market is clearly emerging. We are, for example, witnessing strong investments both from the government and private sector in infrastructure, education and social welfare. All the lights are green in Algeria so to speak, and this is precisely why Boehringer Ingelheim is keen to install an effective presence and footprint in the country as swiftly as possible.

The companyâ??s primary objectives are to strengthen our business volume in the country, to launch innovative products on the market, and to encourage local production of medicines as advocated by the state. We are actively working in this direction and have established a scientific office in Algiers with a view to realizing these goals.

The scientific office, which is broadly the equivalent of what some other pharmaceutical companies call a â??liaison bureauâ??, coordinates our operations and represents the company legally at the national level. It also manages the regulatory, product registration and pharmaco-vigilance side of the business. By â??pharmaco-vigilanceâ??, I am referring to the optimization of a drug, the verification of its proper use and the manner it is prescribed by doctors and pharmacists. The scientific office also plays a vital role in data collection, such as collating the results and feedback from clinical trials, and also in the training up of personnel so in that sense it lies very much at the vanguard in informing and guiding Boehringer Ingelheimâ??s Algerian strategy.

We are also making a big effort to increase our market intelligence. We are aware of the need to continually improve our understanding of national regulations whilst simultaneously gaining greater familiarity of specific behaviours prevalent in the local market. For example the prescribing habits, patterns of drug consumption and disease profiles here are very much unique to the country. To acquire this knowledge is an ongoing process. At the moment we are working hard to understand which specific diseases are most entrenched across the population as a whole and their implications. It is clear, for example, that with time, Algeria's disease profile is shifting more towards non-communicable diseases (NCD).

Within Boehringer Ingelheim, we are always keen to encourage research initiatives and award annual prizes and recognition for quality research that can facilitate innovation in areas where the company is fast developing mastery such as diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and oncology. Boehringer Ingelheim's approach in Algeria is therefore to combine its investments with initiatives to acquire a better understanding of lesser-known diseases afflicting the country.

What specific steps is BI taking to adapt to the Algerian market?

We are obviously trying to promote the Algerian market as much as we can in front of our global executive board, but each national representative will be busy doing exactly the same for his respective country. At my level, I do my best to ensure that new therapies developed by the company are introduced into the Algerian market and especially those treatments against cancer, diabetes, stroke where there is a high need and are life saving drugs.

We are also very eager to align positively with the government's priorities such as assisting the state in its promotion of local manufacturing. We are already in close contact with the ministry and have made the government aware of our genuine desire to contribute to the development of the country's healthcare industry and act in the nation's interest.

Furthermore we firmly believe that local industry has much to gain in collaborating with multinationals such as Boehringer Ingelheim especially in terms of technology, skills and know-how transfer. Although Algeria's existing pharmaceutical manufacturing infrastructure is decent there is still much scope for improvement. Many local plants are not operating to full capacity and their business processes may be below par and this is precisely where international companies like Boehringer Ingelheim can be of real assistance. So we are also striving hard to convey that message.

It makes sense that the country should be pursuing a policy of encouraging generics, but this should also be combined with initiatives to promote research and development. The Algerian pharmaceutical industry could for example participate more in major international research projects, and would stand to benefit much from such projects. Nowadays many of the smaller Algerian firms are already of sufficient caliber to play a role in global research groups and this is yet another area where multinationals can play a facilitating role.

What are the main challenges that you have encountered so far?

Ideally we would like to see follow up on last June's Vision 2020 MOU (to establish the country's region-wide leadership in biotechnology) by implementing a more visible regulatory environment.

Notwithstanding all of this, there can be no doubt that Algeria is undergoing a transformation for the better. Steady GDP growth and considerable investments in infrastructure will encourage more and more international companies to relocate here and foster innovation. The next step for the country will be to transition towards producing drugs with high added value for patients.

Do you see any tensions between multinationals and the local market?

As anywhere, national laws must be respected, that large companies should never forget this. In Algeria the industry is maturing and the regulatory and legal framework is naturally becoming more vigorous as time passes. Multinationals present in the market will have to be more attentive to this in the future and more disciplined in adhering to any new legislation that may arise. From time to time, some companies have engaged in practices that circumvent competition and this is unfortunate because it harms the image of all pharma companies and creates misunderstandings with the doctors, pharmacists and patient associations. In general, however, the reputation of multinational pharma companies is steadily improving in Algeria as we demonstrate how we can respond to the country's present and future needs and the local development of the industry.

What initially made you want to join BI?

A number of factors attracted me. Firstly, the historic pedigree of the company and the fact that the original imprint of the Boehringer family still remains very much part of today's corporate culture. Secondly, the dynamism of a firm so orientated towards innovation, research and development is very exciting and perhaps explains why so many of Boehringer Ingelheim's employees remain with the company for in excess of thirty or forty years. Finally, I was personally very drawn to the ambitions and action plan of BI in the Algerian market.

What is your outlook for the Algerian pharma market and Boehringer Ingelheim's positioning in it?

BI is currently present in two therapeutic areas: cardiovascular and respiratory. In those I can confidently say that we are one of the leaders- both in terms of treatment and prevention - because we possess unique skills and expertise in these specialties. The future for us will be to strengthen our in-country presence, and endeavor to extend out into two new domains: namely diabetes and oncology. Though there are already other international firms covering these segments, we believe that we can actually bring a real added value because our treatment options are radically different. In terms of growth and performance we aspire to attain the same local ranking that we consistently achieve at a global level. World-wide we are ranked number 14, whereas in Algeria we currently in 20th place.

Algeria will surely remain a very important market for Boehringer Ingelheim. The country can be described as a healthcare locomotive for the Maghreb and even for Africa. It is our second African market after South Africa and is rightly generating much interest within our company at the global level. We are confident that Algeria will remain a regional champion for many years to come and have an equally ambitious local strategy to reflect that.

My personal belief is that Algeria has already turned the corner matured into a great country, both in terms of size and potential. It is multicultural, rich, and young, has produced and continues to produce researchers and has all the tools to become a pharma success story.

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