

Interview with Rula Kassem, General Manager, AstraZeneca Levant

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You have been Levant manager for 5 years now and the one that set up AstraZeneca in Jordan. How challenging has it been to establish the company in the Jordanian market?

We needed to have full comprehensive understanding of the market and its different sectors and we needed to understand the patient's needs, and disease burden. From the outside this looks obvious but at a closer look it is not, and it hence took quite some time to properly segment the market and understand the key drivers in each sector. At the end this understanding is of vital importance to the patient.

The Jordanian market is abundantly provided by strong local generics players and has a strong focus on price. As an innovative company entering the market required not just the launch of a brand or product, but a close definition of our added value and competitive edge. This was the AstraZeneca vision from the beginning: we wanted to make a difference and define what healthcare solutions the company could add. We wanted to do things in a different way and not lose sight of the patient.

What have been the key milestones and accomplishments in the company development under your leadership?

AstraZeneca in Jordan today is seen as an R&D company that brings valuable solutions different from others. The company has a very strong foothold in scientific activities and those are a priority. Healthcare providers and patients greatly appreciate our presence.

Are you present here with the entire AstraZeneca portfolio and how important is the presence of AstraZeneca to the Jordanian patient?

AstraZeneca is here with the entire portfolio, like in the other Levant countries. The company has a very strong presence on two levels: with the regional office that serves the entire Levant region, and the local office that focuses purely on serving Jordan.

We see a growth of 'western' non-communicable diseases in Jordan such as cardiovascular and oncology. Which therapeutic areas do you think will drive growth for AstraZeneca in Jordan? How important is the presence of AstraZeneca for the Jordanian patient?

Today we are focusing on primary care, and the main growth drivers are our primary care products. We are expanding into specialty lines though such as oncology, CNS, anti-infectives.

Does it become more challenging to differentiate yourself as an innovative company now that Jordan's generics players are moving into such specialty areas as well?

AstraZeneca has been producing innovative medicine for hundreds of years. Our distinctive character is that we bring innovation and new molecules. Innovators need strong IP though. We have seen some initiatives in Jordan to step up enforcement of IP laws, but execution is still lacking. This leads to unfair competition. Innovative companies are investing heavily in new molecules & solutions and need a return of investment to make it worth the while, and patent protection that lasts at least years provides for that. This concept should be reinforced and properly executed in Jordan in a clever, strategic way. The laws are there but execution and enforcement can be improved.

How do you see innovative & generic medicine co-exist in the market?

The country is proud of the local pharma industry, and rightly so. The issue is that now the landscape is overcrowded, and manufacturers are just copying each other. Where will the industry end if it only battles over the price of a pill? Jordan's generics manufacturers are fighting viciously on price premium, which does not make sense for a small market like Jordan.

I would love to see a broader mindset and more investments in innovation from the country's generics manufacturers. When I debate with them the contradiction between innovative or a generics becomes domestic, but it is not - it is strategic! What is the added value of 32 Amoxicillin products? An innovative product that adds something - even if it is something as simple as an improved formula - can be sold with a competitive edge, and moreover it will be a product that is not only commercially viable but also improves the lives of patients. But I do not see such developments in the country today. Jordan is home to 23 factories in a country of five million - it is too much.

Luckily we see a market that grows at a high pace and AstraZeneca has stated it will grow 8.6 percent in the Middle East between now and 2016. How do you position AstraZeneca in Jordan to optimally capture this growth?

In the past ten years the growth is coming from the private market. Jordan is today the fifth biggest medical tourism destination in the world, but attracting more international patients remains of crucial importance if we want the pharmaceutical market to grow further. The growth that the private industry shows is impossible in the institutional business with its restrictions and budget deficits.

The private sector is dominated by a vivid entrepreneurial spirit. The government, by providing the education and regulatory framework needed, enabled many private sector clinics and hospitals to be built by highly qualified Jordanian doctors. The country needs to support & stimulate the private market and provide a continuous environment to ensure that the aforementioned entrepreneurial spirit continues to blossom and investments will keep coming in. A stream of good and highly educated doctors will make sure of that.

AstraZeneca focuses on the private market and on innovation. I always insist on bringing new solutions & medicines that others have not gone into, on bringing new products in diabetes, CNS and oncology where we know that there is a gap to bridge, and on being a long term partner in education. Anywhere in Jordan we will be mentioned by doctors in that regard, because we develop numerous high quality programs and initiatives for primary care and specialty care education.

AstraZeneca is also unique among MNCs in running two major clinical research studies, the biggest in the area and conducted according to the highest European and American standards. Our clinical trials are not based on drug discovery; one is based on identifying how well the levels of cholesterol

levels of patients are controlled and how they are being treated, and the other on hypertension. The aim is to see whether patients are treated properly and are taking their medicine in a compliant way. No local data was available for this in Jordan. The results of one of the studies came out recently and received amazed responses from doctors.

You are the one that built up the company in Jordan over the past years? Where will you have taken the company three years from now?

AstraZeneca will be a bigger and more focused operation. We are looking to new business development opportunities to expand our presence and our portfolio in order to reach out to more patients and on bringing our new molecules on the market to bridge the huge gaps in among others diabetes and anti-infectives.

Those are the two pillars of our strategy: focus on new innovative molecules and work on innovative healthcare solutions that can expand our presence and reach.

What is your final message to the readers on the commitment of AstraZeneca to bringing its top quality medicines to the Jordanian population?

Keep the patient in the center and make sure that you bring the best for that patient. It is not a matter of price but of health; low-cost products of bad quality means disaster for the patient, and he definitely does not need more trouble. Let us make sure that we are moving towards innovation and strategic thinking. The infrastructure, the know-how and the willingness are there, but let us keep the patient at the center and work strategically towards expanding the opportunities for the Jordanian manufacturers.

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