# Joe Henein â?? CEO & President, NewBridge Pharmaceuticals, UAE (March 2020)

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*NewBridge Pharmaceuticals, a specialty pharma company with Dubai as its regional headquarters for the MENA region, is celebrating its 10th anniversary in 2020. President and CEO Joe Henein discusses the companyâ??s journey to becoming the partner of choice for US and European companies looking to bring their innovative products to MENA and explains his approach to overcoming regional challenges.*

**As NewBridge Pharmaceuticals approaches its $10^{th}$ anniversary, how has the company changed since its inception?**

When I reflect on the journey that started back in the early days of 2010, the company has mainly evolved into what I first envisioned and expected it to be at this stage. Our vision was to create a regional platform ready to license, market and commercialize innovation from companies that did not want to be in the region and seek outsourcing and partnerships. That was the white space we found 10 years ago, and one that not many believed in back then. We steered our company towards that vision through investment, people, structure and discipline. The early days were somewhat opportunistic, searching for the right anchor to our company. Soon after this period, we licensed our first product after partnering with UCB. Soon after, our strategic blueprint started to take shape and began transforming into the specialty pharma we wanted to be. Today, we operate in highly specialized verticals: oncology, immunology, neuroscience, metabolic and rare disease.

**Many competitors in the licensing and distribution arena mention the â??one-stop shopâ?• approach. In what ways do your services go beyond that tagline?**

Frankly speaking, Newbridge was the first one to actually live the tagline and pioneer this business model. NewBridge was established only to focus on licensing new innovative therapeutics across MENA. It is a private company with a base of investors, not a family business. We are not in distribution or manufacturing of generics; hence licensing and innovation is our only business and core strength. This is the position we took from day one and it still holds true 10 years later.

Plenty of the recent innovation is coming from companies that donâ??t have a direct presence in MENA and are not thinking of extending their footprint to the region, or most of the emerging markets for that matter. From day one, we started licensing products not only for MENA but also for a number of African countries, which propelled us to establish our headquarters in Dubai and branch out from there to other countries in the region. This was the nucleus of the one-stop-solution originally started by NewBridge.

Back in 2010, there was little to no interest in creating a regional platform for local distributors, or even regional licensing. This was a changing environment for innovators that wanted a true regional platform as opposed to licensing in each country individually.

Our company is at the vanguard of this business model and I am proud that many companies have followed NewBridgeâ??s footsteps.

Having a start-up in this space is not for the faint-hearted, it is a sensitive, expensive, and complex business that attracts the attention of governments, healthcare professionals and patients alike. NewBridge took the moral high ground and did not go for quick turnarounds. We opted to be in therapeutic areas that address serious unmet medical needs. Once we were in that space, we had to institutionalize ourselves and organize accordingly. We hired talent from big pharma, brought in institutional investors with strong financial stability and a global network. We created standard operating procedures (SOPs) to provide total quality in our operations. Our operation resembles a multinational company but on a smaller scale, with a well-built head office machine in Dubai that can help any pharmaceutical company wanting to outsource and partner their innovation to this region through a reliable and trusted partner. We have built a strong reputation in the marketplace and became a referral point. I am proud of what we have achieved in this 10-year anniversary; for our company, employees, partners and patients who benefit from the innovative therapeutics we bring to the region.

**What were some of the main challenges you encountered along the way?**

There are some challenges operating in the MENA region in general and the pharma start-ups in particular. Evidentially, we have the geopolitical concerns that affect all businesses in general and a dependence on the oil economy for many countries in the region, which impacts the economic landscape immediately with fluctuations in prices of the commodity.

Regarding the MENA pharma market, we do have a high number of people across the region but with varying and often limited patient access to new and innovative medicine in some countries. In terms of diseases, there is a high prevalence of diabetes, hepatitis C, certain types of cancers and rare genetic diseases.

Start-ups may also need more guidance and support from banks, governments and systems to encourage the growth of Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the region. Fortunately for the UAE, the country has taken a leading role, as in many other aspects, towards embracing innovation, SME incubators and support.

**Talking about reputation, what is your approach to maintaining it?**

Reputation is critical for our industry and business. In NewBridge, we have built an excellent reputation centred around the quality of partners and products we are associated with. We are seen by many companies overseas as trusted partners that excel at building brands in a professional, compliant manner, but also as a reliable partner for governments and medical societies to ultimately support the patientâ??s journey. Reputation is also a reflection of the leadership and people working in any company, you work hard to earn it and you maintain it through persistent cultivation of a culture of trust and ethics. Above everything else, it is a constant reminder of the ultimate purpose of our mission and what we do every day towards patients.

**What would you tell our readers about succeeding in the MENA region?**

We succeeded in NewBridge because we knew the market well, the competition, and what to look for. We have done our homework. We built a strong organization to attract and be the partner of choice. We attracted the right products from the right partners and then performed well. We provided the best finances to operate and executed well on the ground. Finally, we built a positive, progressive culture to attract, nurture and grow talents within our company, so teams can maximize their creativity and potential.

**What is your advice for anybody interested in entering the regionâ??s pharmaceutical industry?**

It depends on what they want to accomplish. If it is distribution, manufacturing or building something different. In all cases, I guess it is critical to find out the white space and niche based on the needs of the region. The white space can be in the types of business, products or footprint; you must do a thorough analysis to create an entry strategy. If it involves suppliers of products from outside the region, you need to build the right infrastructure and attract the right talent fit for the job. Plan well for the operational execution since pharmaceuticals is a very complex business that involves many stakeholders. Decide on your financing strategy early on to support your startup phase as well as a possible expansion later on. And last but not least, manage your cash flow well.

**After more than three decades in the pharmaceutical industry, what continues to drive you?**

I have been in the industry for a long time and strongly believe in its mission. When you are in this business, you are influenced and affected by the impact that some of these medicines have on patients and caregivers. I am also driven by challenges; I do not like to take the easy route. Overcoming some of these challenges, especially in such a complex business, motivates and inspires you to keep going. Succeeding in this industry means touching people and patients in particular; it becomes the most humbling, fulfilling and rewarding experience you can have in your life.

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