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03.04.2020

Tags:

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Sanaa Sayagh of Roche Morocco shares her commitment to bringing the latest immunotherapies to Moroccan patients through partnerships with health authorities and the Lalla Salma Foundation on creative access programs. Sayagh also touches on how Roche is attempting to make personalised healthcare a reality in Morocco.

Could you start by introducing Roche’s footprint in Morocco?

This year we are celebrating our 60th anniversary in Morocco. We have an extensive physical footprint in Morocco with three sites: our office, our manufacturing site, and distribution centre. As a result, we are a full-fledged industrial pharmaceutical company under Moroccan law.

Earlier this year, you organized a new edition of OncoHighlights, an event bringing together 250 Moroccan and international oncologists to talk about solutions to the increasing prevalence of cancer in Morocco. What were your key takeaways from this event?

As part of our continuing medical education activities towards healthcare professionals, each year we organize OncoHighlights to present the major scientific advances in the field of oncology and discuss the state of clinical practice in Morocco. Now in its sixth edition, OncoHighlights has become one of the most important annual gatherings in oncology as the information is objective. Even though we sponsor the event, a scientific committee ensures that all the latest therapeutic innovations, including those from other companies, are discussed in equal measure.

The industry has made major advances in 2019 in cancer immunotherapy with several approvals in new cancer types as well as a number of promising breakthroughs with the potential to dramatically improve how patients are treated in the future.

The key theme of the event was personalized healthcare, or how to deliver care tailored to the individual. Advances in genomic profiling, artificial intelligence and Big Data are now enabling us to personalize drug treatments for patients using genetic information. Roche is a pioneer in making this approach a reality in clinical practice, and our recent acquisitions of Flatiron and Foundation Medicine have considerably accelerated our progress towards data-driven personalized healthcare in cancer.

Another highlight of the event was the presentation of updated epidemiological data from the Casablanca region cancer registry showing the incidence and prevalence of cancer in this region.

In developing countries like Morocco, funding ground-breaking but expensive immunology therapies remains a challenge. How are you advocating for more investment in the field?

In Morocco, oncology is a health priority thanks to strong involvement and collaboration between the Ministry of Health and the Lalla Salma Foundation for the Prevention and Treatment of Cancers.

What has been achieved in the last 15 years is fantastic, but there is more to be done for Moroccans to access the latest therapies. We realize that funding innovation is not an easy task, especially in a developing country like Morocco. This is the reason why we collaborate closely with key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Health, the National Agency of Medical Insurance (Agence Nationale de l'Assurance Maladie, ANAM), university hospitals, and other pharma companies, to think creatively on how we can enlarge access to innovation and co-create access programs adapted to the local context.

The informatization of the healthcare system is key to implement creative access solutions: we need to be able to gather anonymous health data to implement these new access solutions. Health authorities are aware of the need to upgrade the health IT infrastructure. There are very interesting initiatives already running in some oncology centres such as the one developed in the National Institute of Oncology in Rabat.

While we could wait until the right IT infrastructure is in place, we could take a proactive approach to adapt ourselves to the existing environment and start with simple and compliant processes.

The National Commission of Personal Data Protection (Commission Nationale de contrôle de la protection des Données à caractère Personnel, CNDP) has declared that 2020 will be the year of health data, and the institution plans to analyze the specificities of all healthcare stakeholders, including pharma companies. How are you collaborating on this project?

We already have a strong collaboration with the CNDP as we are one of the few companies conducting international clinical trials in Morocco. We are currently running four clinical trials in oncology, immunology and neuroscience, and are working with the CNDP to ensure that patient data is secure. Thanks to these projects, we have built a close relationship based on trust. We wish to strengthen our collaboration on health data to be able to create innovative access programs.

Why is Roche one of the few pharma companies conducting clinical trials in Morocco?

While there is a legal framework in place, we still have a lack of visibility regarding administrative processes which causes delays in authorizations. However, there is a willingness from the government to develop clinical research in Morocco, and the Pharma industry (LEMM) has had a constructive dialogue with health authorities on the subject. A committee on clinical research is in place, and we are waiting for their decisions. Despite the lack of visibility on approval timelines, we are already running clinical trials locally, because we are convinced about the high value clinical trials can bring to the healthcare system in our country.

Do you think Morocco has what it takes in terms of capabilities, knowledge and infrastructure to embrace personalized medicine in oncology?

I think the foundation is there because Morocco has well-trained oncologists and infrastructure in the field of oncology.

Healthcare professionals are aware of what is being done around the world, and are starting to ask questions about personalized healthcare in Morocco. We need to provide more information on personalized healthcare, and work together on making it a reality in the country, because this new approach of medicine can have a great benefit on the healthcare system. In addition to the value it brings to patients through a more specific diagnostic, based on gene mutations for example, and more specific and effective treatments, it allows also more visibility on cost effectiveness.

This year, we are launching personalized healthcare in Morocco, by making available genetic sequencing to the healthcare professionals.

At Roche, we are well-positioned to offer those solutions to patients and doctors as we can bring both diagnostic tools and pharmaceutical treatment.

Could you tell us more about your long-standing partnership with the Lalla Salma Foundation?

Our partnership with the Lalla Salma Foundation which began in 2009 was very natural as we share the same objective: improve outcomes for cancer patients. We think that Moroccan patients deserve to access the latest therapeutic innovations, no matter their income level. Our joint program allows 1,500 patients per year to access cancer therapies. Our contribution is not only limited to providing innovative products, we also share our knowledge and know-how and participate in several actions within the national cancer control plan, such as awareness campaigns, research, and medical education.

A final message?

We are committed to giving Moroccan patients access to our innovative medicines as fast as possible by partnering with the key stakeholders, not only in oncology, but in all the therapeutic areas Roche is now entering such as haemophilia, neuroscience, and ophthalmology.

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