Marwan Abdulaziz Janahi – Senior Vice President, Dubai Science Park, part of TECOM Group PJSC

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Marwan Abdulaziz Janahi, Senior Vice President of Dubai Science Park, discusses the park's key milestones and plans for the future, the positive changes in the UAE's regulatory landscape since COVID, and his excitement about digital health trends and technologies.

What have been the key milestones achieved by the Dubai Science Park recently?

The previous year was significant for the Dubai Science Park in many regards, especially as Dubai ramps up efforts to attract foreign investment and talent in line with the Dubai Economic Agenda 'D33'. Among our major accomplishments was the listing of TECOM Group, our parent company, on the Dubai Financial Market. This milestone was driven by the group's diversified growth in several fields, not only science, but also media, technology, and education, making it a strategic move in the right direction.

Furthermore, Dubai Science Park successfully launched two R&D centres last year. The first one was opened at the beginning of 2022 for the Swiss company Firmenich, which specializes in food technologies for flavours and fragrances, as well as vitamins and food supplements, and has recently been acquired by DSM. The second was inaugurated later that year for the Indian wellness group Himalaya. Employing over 50 scientists, the Himalaya Global Research Centre serves as the company's global innovation hub.

The cherry on the cake is welcoming AstraZeneca to the park, which is expected to open sustainable offices in the third quarter of 2023 – when Dubai will also host the COP28 conference – further expanding its presence in the UAE and the Gulf region. This strategic move is in line with their global green agenda and commitment to accelerating the delivery of net-zero healthcare systems.

Regarding manufacturing, Pharmax, a local manufacturer that has been with us for several years, was acquired by Abu Dhabi holding company ADQ in 2021. Following this acquisition, ADQ made three other acquisitions, including that of Acino, a Swiss pharmaceutical company. Acino entered a strategic partnership with Pharmax in 2021, and in March 2023 completed the company's integration into its business, making it a source of pride to witness a local manufacturer going global in less than a decade.

This success story illustrates the pivotal role that the UAE and Dubai can play in the global healthcare and life sciences sector. Government entities and local organizations have launched numerous initiatives to solidify this position, and it is the culmination of all these initiatives that helps us achieve our vision. We want to continue playing an essential role in key government agendas such as Operation 300bn, We the UAE 2031, and Dubai Economic Agenda D33

What are your plans for the park moving forward?

We now host more than 400 companies and our facilities cover the entire value chain: R&D, manufacturing, logistics and marketing. We aim to expand our operations and accommodate even more companies by leveraging our wealth of experience, lessons learned, and understanding of market preferences. Our strategy is to increase capacity, broaden our reach, and create a more diverse and inclusive environment that can cater to companies of different sizes and specialties. We want to continue investing in our infrastructure and environment so that global players can access markets across MENA and regional players and ambitious entrepreneurs can find flexible solutions to establish and grow their operations. Specifically, we aim to attract companies in emerging fields such as digital health and rare diseases, alongside established pharma and medtech companies, to offer a more comprehensive approach.

In December 2022, the government unveiled the 'We the UAE 2031' vision which seeks to enhance the position of the UAE as a global partner and an influential economic hub.

How does healthcare innovation fit into this vision?

One of the key objectives of the 2031 vision is to become a leader in innovation, which is the driving force behind everything we do at Dubai Science Park. To achieve this, we need to focus on increasing our R&D efforts. However, the question arises as to how we can achieve this objective. There are no one-size fits all approach. In the UK for example, government systems such as the NHS invest heavily in early-stage projects, which go through a filtration process to become more mature. However, we must assess if such a model would be suitable for the UAE, and ensure our approach aligns with our capabilities and strengths. The ability to reach larger markets is among our strengths, and we have been successful in this aspect due to our well-developed logistics, robust banking system, and event-hosting capabilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a shift towards more R&D activities, and the regulatory system has improved significantly to support this. During the pandemic, we adjusted approval timelines to be part of global clinical trials to develop vaccines in collaboration with the US, China, and Russia. In just two years, we streamlined our regulatory process, making it more robust and efficient, creating a strong foundation to accelerate innovation. The Department of Health – Abu Dhabi too is working closely with pharmaceutical companies to encourage more R&D.

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We also see a growing number of late-stage clinical trials being carried out in the UAE, with the aim of providing access to treatments. This is particularly true for rare diseases, as the Middle East has a higher percentage of patients affected by such diseases than other countries. Several established pharmaceutical companies are investing in rare disease treatments, with companies such as AstraZeneca, which recently acquired Alexion, seeking to identify and treat patients in the region as part of their market access strategy. This is a highly positive trend.

However, we also need to focus on pushing ideas that are being developed at local universities from the lab bench to the market. This is a long-term objective that cannot be achieved overnight, as it requires the development of capabilities and talent. I believe this will take place within the next five to ten years. It is crucial to take the right measures to make this happen.

What are you doing to help research at local universities come to fruition?

We collaborate with many local universities and have a sister entity, Dubai International Academic City, which houses world-renowned institutions such as the University of Birmingham and BITS Pilani's Dubai campus. Many of these universities, particularly the larger ones, have a strong focus on science and offer graduate programs such as masters in science and PhDs. There is a growing pool of talent contributing to R&D in the UAE and in Dubai, spurred by government-led initiatives such as the Golden Visa to attract skilled professionals. Our goal is to establish a bridge between these talented professionals, industry players and students working on novel concepts to help them further develop these ideas.

What are some of the healthcare trends that are of special interest to you?

I am deeply interested in digital health technology. Nowadays, much of people's healthcare experiences are digitally recorded: visits to the doctor, prescriptions, tests, insurance approval… As a result, we have a vast amount of data that can be leveraged for valuable insights. This treasure trove of data is like a sleeping dragon that is waiting to be awakened.

Startups have a crucial role to play in using this information to enhance the patient journey. For instance, if a diabetic person wears a wedding band-like device that monitors their glucose levels, their doctor could have access to that data, and somebody may check on them if their sugar levels become too low or too high.

Currently, individuals who use such devices must attend physical appointments to be examined, which is just one example of an outdated process. There are numerous other examples.

We're also seeing an increasing focus on personalized healthcare and genomics. It is a major priority for the UAE government, as proven by the launch of the National Genome Strategy in March 2023. This past January, Innovate Life Science Lab opened a genomics testing lab at DSP, using Wipro's data science platforms, to offer specialized genomic services to analyze and interpret a previously untapped data pool.

This will be valuable for healthcare providers, patients and researchers as we strive to find innovative ways to detect, treat and understand various genetic conditions while making patient-centric healthcare more attainable and affordable.

These issues are of interest because the Gulf region is primarily affected by lifestyle diseases, which necessitate daily management. It is not solely reliant on doctor's visits but rather on what individuals do every day. Behavioural changes occur gradually, and digital health is the way to effect such change.

I am excited to see that the UAE is witnessing a boom in health-tech with companies such as Okadoc, a patient engagement platform that connects patients with healthcare providers and doctors, recently securing investments.

There is still much to be done in the fields of lifestyle, exercise and nutrition. My wish is for people to live longer and healthier lives. And as I said, we have a lot of lifestyle diseases both globally and in the region, such as diabetes, hypertension, etc. My hope is that digital health becomes part of the ecosystem and makes people more accountable for their health.

For instance, if I go see my doctor because I have a cold, insurance will cover the cost, no questions asked. However, this approach should be revised so that the insurance only covers the appointment if specific criteria are met or if it is an emergency. In other cases, teleconsultations can be utilized. Additionally, coverage of certain tests could be personalized based on the individual's medical history or family history of illnesses such as diabetes or hypertension.

To achieve this, it is important to involve the payers in the innovation ecosystem. If the payers set specific criteria for coverage, it can encourage innovators to explore digital health areas that have not yet been explored. I think customization and personalization are key to developing effective healthcare systems, and drive innovation.

Do you have any final words?

I believe there are various promising developments in the healthcare industry in Dubai, and it's hard to pick just one. I anticipate that there will be a rise in R&D and manufacturing thanks to the UAE government's accelerated approvals and Dubai's innovation investments, business-friendly legislation, and strong logistics capabilities. Digital health is another field that I think is still in its early stages and has a lot of potential for growth. There will also be more large international companies setting up headquarters in the Dubai Science Park, attracted by the city's status as a global environment for R&D and innovation in the life sciences, energy, and environment sectors. Discussions with some of them are already underway. Overall, it's an exciting time for the healthcare industry in Dubai.

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