Tarek Thaher – Regional Director GCC, MS Pharma



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08.06.2023

Tags: UAE, GCC, MS Pharma, Generics, MEA, MENA

Tarek Thaher of MS Pharma, a leading generics firm in the Middle East and Africa, describes the benefits of manufacturing localisation in the UAE, his excitement about the firm's growth trajectory based on a host of upcoming product launches, and its moves into the biosimilars space.



Could you introduce yourself to our international audience and give an overview of MS Pharma's operations in the UAE?

I am a pharmacist by training and began my career as a medical representative at my former employer back in 2002. After over two years, I was promoted to regional products specialist and

two years after that to supervisor, one of the youngest at that time, managing Jordan and Syria.

A few years later I took up the helm as manager of five countries, the emerging markets within an emerging region; Libya, Syria, Jordan, Iraq and Yemen. This propelled me to then take up a regional manager role in the MENA for under-license products and set up the hospital portfolio in order to have a dedicated oncology and injectables team in the region.

Then after nearly 15 years at my former employer, I decided to shift my career and join MS Pharma back in 2016. I saw and still believe we have a well-integrated strategy to grow and evolve, and this fascinated me, as I commenced my journey here as a regional export manager. This entailed managing all commercial operations for the company outside of Jordan, for example in Yemen, Sudan, the GCC and Saudi Arabia.

Then in 2020 MS Pharma took the step to establish itself with our own office in Dubai. We already had agreements with local partners and decided it was the perfect time to activate our own operations here, starting from nothing. Thus far we have already launched 22 products and we aim to have 55 products on the market by the end of 2025.

MS Pharma has a presence from manufacturing all the way to commercial, and this is spread across the region. What is the importance of the UAE office as a cog in this engine?

The company was first established as United Pharmaceuticals in 1989 in Jordan and was a contract manufacturing facility for a large array of pharmaceutical partners of varying sizes. The company then saw an opportunity in Algeria and established a manufacturing site there around 2007. On top of these two sites, we also have a state-of-the-art injectables manufacturing facility in Jordan called MSPI. MS Pharma corporate was then established in 2013 with the backing of these three manufacturing sites, and since then the company has constructed another manufacturing facility in Saudi Arabia, MSPS.

In 2020 MS Pharma took the bold move to open the UAE offices for market authorisation and scientifical approval here. This means we have our own MS Pharma products that are being sold in the UAE. This is done by having contracts with two contract manufacturing sites that we are using to manufacture our products.

What advantages do you have in undertaking the manufacturing of your products within the UAE, rather than just importing them from your Jordan manufacturing facility?

The UAE MoH have done a great job in attracting companies to undertake their own or use contract manufacturers in the country. Manufacturing our own products in the country rather than purely importing them allows us to be considered a local UAE company and gives us a few clear advantages.

Firstly, we can get better pricing. This is extremely important when dealing with the field of generics where the margins are so tight. Secondly, we are given fast-track registration, so from accepting, reviewing, and approving the products it can take around 12 to 18 months, an incredibly quick turnaround. Thirdly, there is a ruling here that being a local marketing authorization holder (MAH) company, I can get a second brand from a local manufacturer brand, meaning you are getting their product under your own brand name. This allows us to grow our portfolio at a more rapid rate and more competitive pricing, which is important as we look to increase our footprint.

All in all, it is a pharmaceutical environment that promotes a local presence. MS Pharma has taken this approach and is reaping the benefits thus far. Saudi Arabia, where we also manufacture our products, also has many benefits in acting in a local way, and obviously, we do have our own manufacturing plant there already.

Another point, we are looking to license our products to a manufacturing facility, not just have them produce our products. This is another area of potential growth, as well as possibly exporting products that we are manufacturing in the UAE, though we have a few hurdles to overcome first.

As you mentioned, MS Pharma is an ambitious company which is looking to grow rapidly. Where is your current portfolio at today and where do you see the growth coming from?

In regard to where we see ourselves growing within the UAE, we aim to be a top 10 generics company by 2025. We still have a little way to go, but only 2 years ago we were around the 30th position, so definitely are on the way up and our local strategy approach will be a big way of getting there. Ambition is a good thing, and we will continue to drive forward.

At MS Pharma we are mainly focused on general generics and analgesics, and we see growth coming in the area of biosimilars. Our therapeutic areas are broad, placing our footprint in cardiovascular, CNS (central nervous system), respiratory, and oncology.

As mentioned previously, an upward trajectory will come through launching new products and expanding our portfolio, especially in areas where we are currently lacking an impact. We want to cover more heavily therapeutic areas where we are not so strong such as cardiovascular and CNS, especially the latter where branded generic competition is not as strong.

We are most excited in the next few years about biosimilars, and especially those with already FDA and EMA approval as this is especially important in gaining the trust of practitioners.

Biosimilars are the next step up for any generics company and seem the logical future for MS Pharma. When do you see yourself launching them into your region?

We already have an agreement with mAbxience, a Spanish pharmaceutical company, to commercialise their biosimilar of Bevacizumab in the region. Furthermore, in December 2021, we signed an agreement with Swiss company, Bioeq to commercialise their biosimilar of Ranibizumab. This is already in Jordan and Iraq and will be coming to the UAE later this year or early 2024. MS Pharma has signed another agreement with a company that has FDA approval, and again this could be later this year. All in all, exciting times are ahead, and we are preparing ourselves for these exciting launches.

Given the significant variation in economic and political volatility across countries in the MEA region, how is MS Pharma best placed to succeed?

Diversification is extremely important, not only in terms of business model, but also in the portfolio and way of thinking. You must be able to adapt at all times to different countries and opportunities and be innovative and proactive in your approach. For example, Sudan is a tricky market and many of the large multinationals have left due to the current challenging political situation. Patients still need important medicines there though, so we have seen this as a great opportunity as it is a large population and a less competitive market. We must adapt to this situation, but this resilience and flexibility is a trait of how MS Pharma works throughout the region.

You have had an impressive growth trajectory since undertaking operations a few years ago. How do you go about deciding which products are brought to this regional market from your portfolio?

We are always looking for niches in the market that have fewer potential competitors and a good amount of demand. This means a market need is already there for us. When looking for potential partners to work within the region, like the aforementioned agreements with the European groups, we look that they already have EMA and/or FDA approval as this, as mentioned previously, gives confidence to healthcare practitioners to utilise our products.

You mentioned growth, and commercially we are growing, but also as a team, we are expanding. We started with only 6 employees in the UAE in 2020, and by 2025 we hope to be around 25, adding to the already 20 we have across the other regional countries.

How do you plan to really build the brand name of MS Pharma in the UAE in such a dense generic market?

We aim to build a stronger presence with healthcare practitioners and have a stronger footprint within injectables so hospitals can better know the name MS Pharma, not just wholesales and pharmacist chains.

What I will say, we already have a strong brand name, and this strength differs across the countries in the region. For example, we have a well-established brand in Vitamin D3 that has an innovative soft gelatine that made a big difference for people during COVID, and people remember us because of this.

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