Diederik Kok – Head of GCC, Biogen

By facilitating collaborations and fostering a supportive regulatory environment, Saudi Arabia can position itself as an attractive destination for clinical trials

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Diederik Kok, Head of GCC, discusses his experience piloting Biogen's newly established direct presence in the region and reviews its varied neuroscience landscape and the importance of tailoring the organization's approach. He also speaks about Biogen's commitment to conducting clinical trials in the GCC, its recent risk-sharing agreement with the Saudi government and the rare disease therapies it is looking to launch this year.

Could you share a brief overview of your career journey leading up to your current role as head of the GCC at Biogen?

I began my professional journey with a master’s degree in Amsterdam, having been born and raised in the Netherlands. Initially uncertain about my career path, I aimed for a multinational corporation and landed a role with MSD, where I then went on to spent 16 years. Starting as a sales representative in Amsterdam, I progressed through various roles in sales and marketing, eventually becoming the commercial director in Russia and Eurasia. Despite not dreaming of relocating to Russia initially, my family and I embraced the opportunity, with my children aged six and eight at the time and truly loved it.

Subsequently, I had a 2 year experience with Zoetis, formerly Pfizer Animal Health, as the general manager for Egypt and the Middle East, where I expanded my understanding of the region. Eventually, I was approached by Biogen, where I initially managed the Russia, Turkey, and CIS

markets before transitioning to my current position overseeing the GCC. In 2023, I was asked to relocate to Dubai to merge affiliates and establish a GCC organization, a role I have been dedicated to for the past year and a half.

What is the significance of the GCC region for Biogen?

Historically, Biogen has primarily engaged in distributors in the GCC region, lacking a direct presence until recently. In 2021, we took decisive steps by establishing offices in both Dubai and Riyadh, recognizing the immense potential of this region. The GCC holds considerable appeal for Biogen due to several factors. Firstly, countries like the UAE and Qatar offer rapid access to innovation, supported by stable economies and currencies. Additionally, the political environment in the region is notably stable. The GCC's agility and propensity for innovation make it incredibly compelling for Biogen. We are delighted to be actively engaged in this dynamic region.

Your presence in Riyadh aligns with the Saudi government's initiative requiring companies to establish regional headquarters there. Could you shed some light on how Biogen is navigating this initiative and the benefits or challenges it presents?

The Saudi government's initiative as part of Vision 2030 is to designate Riyadh/Saudi as a hub for regional headquarters which was a significant factor in our decision-making process.

Given Saudi Arabia's prominence as the largest market in the GCC, obtaining the regional headquarters license was a logical step for Biogen. We successfully secured the license last year and have since established the necessary infrastructure, including legal entities, bank accounts, and personnel. As head of the regional headquarters, I split my time between Riyadh and Dubai, ensuring a smooth transition process.

Biogen is renowned for its singular focus on neuroscience, setting it apart within the pharmaceutical industry. From your perspective, what are the advantages and disadvantages of operating within a single therapeutic area like neuroscience?

Biogen prides itself on its reputation as a biotech company with a strong emphasis on neuroscience, although we do extend beyond this scope. Our extensive experience in neuroscience, spanning pivotal contributions to areas such as multiple sclerosis (MS), spinal

muscular atrophy (SMA), Alzheimer's disease, Friedrich's Ataxia and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), provides us with a distinct advantage.

Specializing in a single therapeutic area fosters unparalleled focus and expertise, enabling us to navigate the intricate landscape of neuroscience with precision. This targeted approach is increasingly embraced across the pharmaceutical industry, evident in the strategic shifts of other companies. Concentration allows for a deeper understanding of the field and facilitates strategic resource allocation.

However, there are considerations to bear in mind. Dependence on a single therapeutic area necessitates a robust pipeline and a resilient portfolio to mitigate potential challenges. Yet, in a landscape where focus is paramount, mastery in one domain often outweighs diversification. This trend towards specialization echoes beyond pharmaceuticals, as evidenced by strategic moves within companies. While concentration may introduce dependencies, it affords the opportunity to excel in a specific domain, driving innovation and advancing patient care.

Within the GCC region you oversee, what is the current landscape for neuroscience? Are there significant gaps that need addressing?

The landscape for neuroscience in the GCC region is notably diverse. In countries like Qatar and the UAE, where development is advanced, there exists substantial awareness surrounding neurological diseases. However, challenges arise in vast and less developed areas such as in remote cities/areas in Saudi Arabia, which despite possessing considerable knowledge, face challenges in awareness and infrastructure. For instance, while there are an estimated 20,000 MS patients in Saudi Arabia, only around 11,000 are receiving treatment, indicating a significant untreated population. Factors contributing to this disparity include stigma, limited diagnostic facilities, and disparities in healthcare accessibility, particularly in remote regions. There lies a critical opportunity for development, especially in less developed areas like the more rural regions of Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, in countries like the Emirates, Kuwait, and Qatar, a key challenge lies in addressing disparities in healthcare access between locals and expatriates. While healthcare provision is generally robust for locals and well-insured expatriates, many expatriates face difficulties in accessing essential treatments, including medication reimbursement for diseases like MS and SMA. This discrepancy underscores the need for collaborative efforts between insurers, charities, and pharmaceutical companies to ensure equitable access to healthcare for all residents, regardless of

nationality or economic status.

The big news from Biogen earlier this year was that the company was abandoning its ownership rights to its much-publicized Alzheimer's drug and instead focusing on a newer medicine in partnership with Eisai as well as its pipeline candidates. How did stakeholders in your region receive this news, especially given that this product was already available to patients in countries like the UAE?

Overseeing major global shifts on a local scale has been both challenging and rewarding. As Biogen made strategic decisions regarding therapy area focus, effective communication with stakeholders became paramount. Engaging with stakeholders, including the Ministry of Health and Prevention in the UAE, involved transparent discussions about the changes and their implications. While disappointment was inevitable, stakeholders also recognized the potential of new treatments with stronger data. Addressing their concerns and swiftly transitioning to discussions on solutions was crucial.

For instance, recent conversations with stakeholders, conducted remotely due to unforeseen weather conditions, underscored our commitment to bringing the latest innovations to the UAE market. The Ministry of Health and Prevention has displayed enthusiasm for embracing these advancements, aligning with the UAE's aspiration to lead in innovation. Healthcare professionals, familiar with amyloid-based therapies, eagerly anticipate the introduction of new treatments, highlighting the importance of proactive engagement and collaboration in facilitating this transition.

Physician readiness is paramount when introducing innovative treatments. Physicians must carefully select and monitor patients receiving these therapies, ensuring optimal outcomes. Fortunately, many physicians in the UAE possess experience and knowledge in this area, eagerly anticipating innovative solutions for their patients.

While the UAE demonstrates a proactive approach to embracing innovation in healthcare, the landscape in Saudi Arabia presents unique challenges due to its size and diversity. Could you elaborate on your strategy for introducing new products across the region, particularly in Saudi Arabia?

Introducing new treatments across the GCC region, especially in Saudi Arabia, requires a nuanced strategy. Saudi Arabia, while wealthy, presents complexities due to its vast size and diverse population. However, there is a notable shift in Saudi FDA's approach, with the implementation of fast-track approval pathways and a commitment to fostering innovation. Moreover, there is an increasing emphasis on understanding the value proposition of new treatments through high-technology assessments, reflecting a desire for both speed and efficacy in healthcare innovation. This evolving landscape underscores the importance of tailoring our approach to meet the unique needs and priorities of each market within the region.

Addressing localization requirements and contributing to Saudi Arabia's economic development is a priority for us. While establishing manufacturing sites in every country may not be feasible for smaller biotech companies like ours, we are committed to exploring alternative avenues for investment and contribution. For instance, we actively engage in initiatives such as conducting clinical trials within the region and establishing regional headquarters, which serve as hubs for operations and further investment. These efforts align with our commitment to not only bringing innovation to the region but also fostering sustainable economic growth and development.

How receptive has the Saudi government been to these arguments regarding investment in areas like clinical trials and scientific collaborations, considering their focus on localization and economic development?

The reception varies depending on the context. While some stakeholders may express disappointment when we clarify that we will not be opening manufacturing facilities, they often come to understand the rationale behind our decision. Explaining the potential for collaboration in areas such as scientific research, clinical trials, and data utilization tends to resonate positively. This approach aligns with the evolving priorities of governments, not only in Saudi Arabia but also in the UAE, where the emphasis is shifting towards leveraging data and scientific advancements. By highlighting the broader impact of investments in research and scientific collaboration, we aim to foster a more comprehensive understanding of how we can contribute to the region's growth and development beyond traditional manufacturing ventures.

Biogen's recent initiative in Saudi Arabia, signing a risk-sharing agreement for one of its medicines, garnered significant attention. How crucial do you perceive these alternative access models to be for Biogen's future endeavours in Saudi Arabia?

The risk-sharing agreement in Saudi Arabia marks a significant milestone for Biogen, reflecting our commitment to innovative access models. Moving forward, these models will play a pivotal role in our operations in Saudi Arabia and beyond. Collaborating closely with stakeholders, including the Ministry of Health and healthcare providers, allows us to gather valuable real-world data and insights. By understanding which patients benefit most from our treatments and the extent of these benefits, we can optimize patient outcomes and enhance overall healthcare delivery. While pioneering such initiatives comes with its challenges, we are actively refining and improving our approach in partnership with the Saudi government. Streamlining processes, such as reducing the time from diagnosis to treatment initiation, underscores our dedication to improving patient care. We anticipate that these innovative access models will become increasingly prevalent in Saudi Arabia and potentially in other countries as well, driving positive outcomes and patient satisfaction.

Saudi Arabia’s ambitious goal to become a regional innovation hub by 2030 and a global hub by 2040 hinges significantly on boosting clinical trial numbers. What are your insights on the suitability of Saudi Arabia, and the region more broadly, as a host for clinical trials?

At Biogen, we have ongoing clinical trials in Saudi Arabia, with one of the largest patient cohorts globally, a testament to the region’s potential. The quality of participation from centres in Saudi Arabia is notably high, indicating a strong foundation for clinical research. However, to attract more trials, it is crucial to understand and meet the rigorous requirements set by companies and regulatory bodies. Given the competition with established trial locations like the UK, Spain, and Germany, ensuring quality and efficiency in trial conduct is paramount. By facilitating collaborations and fostering a supportive regulatory environment, Saudi Arabia can position itself as an attractive destination for clinical trials, contributing significantly to its aspirations of becoming a leading innovation hub in the coming decades.

With Saudi Arabia’s ambitious Vision 2030 and its drive to become a global innovation hub, do you think there is a risk of advancing too quickly without laying a solid foundation first?

It is a valid concern, balancing rapid progress with foundational stability. However, what is remarkable about Saudi Arabia is its ability to execute on grand plans when the vision and drive align. The country has demonstrated a willingness to seek expertise and make necessary

investments to upscale infrastructure and capabilities. While there is always a question of pace, the commitment to progress is evident, especially considering the significant transformations achieved in a relatively short period. The ambition to be among the top global innovators may be ambitious, but with the right strategies and continued dedication, substantial progress is foreseeable. In comparison to other emerging markets, Saudi Arabia stands out for its stable economy, currency, and clear long-term vision, making it an attractive destination for investment and development initiatives.

Biogen, despite being a 45-year-old company with over 7,500 employees globally, still maintains a spirit akin to that of a start-up. Can you elaborate on how this ethos translates into practice, and perhaps shed light on the culture specific to Biogen in the GCC region?

Biogen's culture is deeply rooted in a pioneering mindset and a commitment to tackling the seemingly impossible. This spirit is particularly evident in our relentless pursuit of treatments for challenging conditions like Alzheimer's disease. While other companies may shy away from such endeavours, we embrace the challenge with determination and care for the patients we aim to serve.

In the GCC, where Biogen's presence is relatively young at just three years old, this ethos is amplified. Our team is comprised of individuals from diverse backgrounds, bringing together talent from both multinational corporations and local companies. With over 20 nationalities represented, there is a palpable energy and a shared belief that we can make a meaningful difference in the region.

Our goal is not just to provide rapid access to treatments but to ensure that the right patients receive the care they need. This dedication to patient-centricity is at the core of everything we do, driving us to leverage our collective knowledge and expertise to positively impact the lives of those we serve in the GCC.

What are you looking forward to achieving over the next year or two in this role?

We are introducing a new treatment to address another rare disease known as Friedreich Ataxia (FA). This treatment is already approved in the US, and we are currently in the process of seeking registration across the GCC this year. FA is a rare condition affecting approximately 100 patients in

the GCC region, yet there is currently no available treatment. We have received the first request in the UAE and Saudi Arabia, demonstrating the urgency for this treatment in our region. Additionally, we are also bringing a treatment for a rare form of ALS, SOD1 ALS, which affects an estimated 30 patients locally. Similarly, there is a lack of effective treatment options for these patients. These developments are part of the exciting progress at Biogen, complementing our existing portfolio addressing conditions such as MS and SMA.

Moreover, we are enthusiastic about introducing our Eisai-partnered Alzheimer’s disease therapy to the region. These advancements mark a significant milestone as we expand our regional headquarters and collaborate with governments to enhance access and support for patients within the ecosystem.

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