Jean-Paul Scheuer – MCO Lead and General Manager Specialty Greater Gulf, Sanofi



R&D investments are paramount to our mission, and we are committed to intensifying our efforts in the region

13.06.2024

Tags: Saudi Arabia, Sanofi, Investment, R&D, Vaccines, Immunology, Launches, Strategy

Over the past three years, Sanofi has significantly expanded its presence in the GCC region, launching 40-50 new products, including treatments for rare diseases and advancements in immunology, diabetes management, and vaccines. As Jean-Paul Scheuer explains, this expansion aligns with Sanofi's goal to become a leading immunology company globally and cater to diverse medical needs across all age groups. Scheuer also notes that the Gulf region has been recognized as one of Sanofi's top 10 key markets, with more R&D investment and faster launches forthcoming.

It has been three years since our last conversation in 2021. What have been some of the key milestones and updates for Sanofi in the region during this period?

Over the past three years, one notable change is our expansion. We've grown significantly, enabling us to reach even more patients, which remains our primary focus. Our efforts have resulted in a remarkable number of new product launches – between 40 and 50 – across the GCC region since 2021. These launches include groundbreaking treatments which have made a substantial impact on the lives of thousands of patients.

We've extended our reach to various medical conditions, from asthma to gastrointestinal issues, catering to patients of all ages, from infants to the elderly. Additionally, we've introduced treatments for rare diseases, providing life-saving solutions where none previously existed. Our

commitment to innovation extends to vaccines and diabetes management, with ongoing preparations for future launches.

Looking ahead, our ambition is to establish ourselves as the leading immunology company globally, a vision that aligns with the region's openness to innovation and demand for advanced treatments. Our collaboration with local authorities underscores our shared goal of enhancing healthcare accessibility and efficacy. In essence, our focus remains on expanding our reach and making a positive difference in the lives of patients.

Given your region's pharma market is relatively small, what relevance does it hold for Sanofi globally?

While the Gulf region holds significance for many companies, including Saudi Arabia, it may not always rank among the top priorities on a global scale. However, it's crucial to note that Sanofi is undergoing a significant change aimed at enhancing our effectiveness and prioritizing resources, particularly for research and development. As part of this transformation, we've identified 10 key markets, including China, USA, France, Japan, Germany, the UK, Spain, and Italy. Importantly, the Gulf region has secured its place among these top markets, which translates to increased resources and investment, particularly in research and development and the prioritization of new product launches. This underscores Sanofi's commitment to the region's development and healthcare policies that are conducive to industry investment.

Our shared objective with local authorities is to ensure patients have access to the highest level of care and treatment available. Being among the top 10 priority markets is a testament to the region's growing importance, and while it comes with added responsibilities, it also presents exciting opportunities for our team to make a meaningful difference in the lives of patients. In the pharmaceutical industry, success is not merely about personal or professional interests; it's driven by a collective commitment to improving patient outcomes—a sentiment deeply ingrained within our team here in the Gulf.

You mentioned the critical importance of R&D investments on a global scale, particularly in prioritizing the launch of first-in-class or best-in-class products, alongside significant cost reductions. How do you foresee this impacting the region, and what can you share regarding R&D investments in this area?

R&D investments are paramount to our mission, and we are committed to intensifying our efforts in the region, especially concerning R&D. Globally, Sanofi has pledged over 700 million euros in additional investment, supplementing the substantial EUR six billion already allocated to R&D. Our focus is on 12 key products in development, identified for their potential to significantly impact patient outcomes, either as first-in-class or best-in-class therapies. We're expediting the development of these products, driven by our responsibility to bring them to patients expeditiously, knowing they offer advancements beyond existing treatment options.

The goal isn't solely commercial gain but rather to introduce products that address unmet medical needs comprehensively. We've opted against pursuing certain avenues where superior alternatives already exist, prioritizing innovation.. In the Gulf region specifically, there has been a notable shift towards attracting increased R&D investments over the past two years. This aligns with the KSA government's Vision 2030 and UAE priorities, which actively seek to foster R&D investment and innovation. Efforts include streamlining approval processes, bolstering infrastructure, and enhancing clinical trial capabilities to rival those found in more established markets.

Today, Gulf countries boast clinical trial capabilities comparable to those in the US and Europe, thanks to significant investments in infrastructure and expertise. Sanofi is actively engaged in this momentum, working closely with local authorities to facilitate R&D activities. Our recent efforts have placed the region firmly in our sights, prompting a surge in feasibility studies and R&D inquiries. Notably, Saudi Arabia has emerged as a focal point, with investments in both infrastructure and talent bolstering its clinical trial capabilities. We're witnessing a tangible shift, with increasing interest and commitment to R&D in the region, which bodes well for our collaborative efforts to advance healthcare innovation. Ultimately, our responsibility is to align with regional priorities and leverage our capabilities to drive meaningful progress in healthcare.

You mentioned the efficient fast-track approval process observed in the region, aligning with what many industry executives have noted regarding the robust regulatory framework. However, despite significant progress, there likely remain areas for improvement. How would you characterize the current access scenario, considering both the strides made in recent years and the ongoing challenges?

The speed at which products can be approved in this region is truly remarkable. Following our product's approvals in Europe, we can obtain registration here within days, making us one of the first countries worldwide to launch. The regulatory process has been incredibly efficient, a

testament to the region’s commitment to facilitating timely access to innovative treatments. Even with ongoing changes, such as the establishment of a new regulatory body in Abu Dhabi, the system’s effectiveness remains unparalleled.

Saudi Arabia has also made significant strides, though perhaps not as rapidly as some would desire. Nonetheless, compared to two years ago, the registration process has accelerated substantially, with products now typically approved within four to six months—a remarkable achievement. Furthermore, the region’s regulatory bodies have become more independent, ensuring thorough evaluations while expediting approvals where appropriate. This shift towards efficiency is evident in Saudi Arabia’s willingness to accept submissions before formal registration, allowing for quicker launches.

Undoubtedly, there’s always room for improvement, but the progress we’ve witnessed is commendable. The region’s emergence as a key market has spurred investments in infrastructure and talent, fostering an environment conducive to research and development. Collaborations between industry and authorities have flourished, facilitated by a mutual understanding of shared objectives. Indeed, the level of access we have to government officials here is unparalleled, enabling productive discussions and swift resolution of issues when they arise.

Ultimately, it’s the spirit of partnership and trust that sets this region apart. While differences may arise, there’s a genuine commitment to finding common ground for the benefit of patients. This collaborative ethos, coupled with a proactive approach to addressing challenges, makes the region an exceptional place to work and invest in healthcare innovation.

Last time we spoke, you mentioned that Saudi Arabia wasn’t quite ready for health technology assessment (HTA). Has there been a shift in this regard?

There has been significant progress in this area, particularly within the Ministry of Health. The pace at which they’ve embraced the topic is truly remarkable. In fact, it’s become such a focal point that we’re actively recruiting a specialist in the field this year. This demonstrates not just a readiness, but a proactive approach to integrating HTA into decision-making processes. The capacity to understand and analyze the economic impact of healthcare products has improved substantially, making discussions on this front increasingly meaningful.

What’s particularly striking is the mindset here. Unlike in Europe or the US, where there’s often a perception of conflict between industry interests and public health objectives, there’s a recognition

that both parties must benefit for sustainable collaboration. They understand that for companies to continue investing in research, development, and local manufacturing, there needs to be a fair balance between affordability and profitability.

Elsewhere in my region, we recently had a negotiation with one country regarding pricing, and while they initially proposed a steep decrease, we were able to engage in constructive dialogue and find a mutually beneficial solution. This exemplifies the collaborative spirit and pragmatic approach that characterizes our interactions in the Greater Gulf. Ultimately, the goal is to ensure access to innovative treatments while maintaining a sustainable healthcare ecosystem—a goal that benefits patients, industry, and society as a whole.

We've heard about Sanofi's global push towards integrating AI into both internal processes and external engagements. How does this initiative manifest itself in your region?

The emphasis on AI has seen an incredible surge, even within the past year. Just over a year ago, it was merely a topic of discussion, but today, it's at the forefront of our corporate strategy. During a recent corporate meeting in Boston, more than half of our time was dedicated to discussions on the digital revolution and the pivotal role of AI within it. We're striving to become a leading company in AI application within the pharmaceutical industry, and I'm proud to say that we're making significant strides in this direction.

AI is revolutionizing various aspects of our operations. For instance, in manufacturing and supply chain management, we've achieved over 95 percent precision in forecasting, resulting in less waste, fewer shortages, and improved cost management. We're also leveraging AI in financial modeling and other internal processes, leading to greater efficiency and accuracy.

In research and development, AI is enabling us to accelerate the development of new treatments by mobilizing clinical studies more efficiently and predicting outcomes with greater accuracy. This not only expedites the delivery of innovative therapies to patients but also enables us to do so at a lower cost.

What's noteworthy is that AI isn't just a standalone initiative; it's deeply integrated into our corporate strategy and everyday operations. Unlike past approaches where digital initiatives were treated as separate projects, we've embraced AI as a core component of our organizational DNA. We've learned from past mistakes and are now leading the way in AI implementation within the

pharmaceutical industry.

However, we recognize that AI should complement human expertise rather than replace it entirely. While AI alone can yield impressive results, the synergy of AI and human intelligence is what truly propels us forward. This balanced approach ensures that AI serves our objectives effectively while maintaining human oversight and accountability.

What are the biggest priorities for yourself and Sanofi in the next few years, considering the progress made so far and the ongoing challenges in healthcare?

There’s a lot of exciting progress on the horizon for Sanofi in the region. Looking ahead, our next priorities revolve around continuing to bring innovative treatments to patients. We have a robust pipeline with numerous launches planned in the coming years.

This year alone, we’re set to launch groundbreaking treatments across various therapeutic areas. For instance, we’ll be introducing a new treatment for patients who have undergone transplantation, as well as a revolutionary therapy for type 1 diabetes that can delay its onset in children, potentially protecting thousands of young lives.

Additionally, we’re gearing up to be among the first to launch a cutting-edge treatment for a specific condition in the region, further expanding our portfolio. Looking into next year, we’re hopeful to launch a new treatment for hemophilia, pending the latest clinical results. Furthermore, we’re excited about the potential launch of a new therapy for multiple sclerosis, addressing unmet needs in this area.

Moreover, we’re committed to bringing new treatments for rare diseases, embarking on an adventure that holds immense promise for patients and underscores our dedication to advancing healthcare.

It’s truly an exhilarating time for our team, as we embrace our responsibility to patients and strive to maintain our position as one of the leading affiliates in the company. The opportunities before us are vast, and we’re excited to continue making a meaningful difference in the lives of patients across the region.

How do you assess Sanofi’s role as a significant player in Saudi Arabia amidst the ambitious Vision 2030 transformation?

The transformation happening in Saudi Arabia under Vision 2030 is truly remarkable, and Sanofi is proud to be a part of this journey. Every time I visit, I witness tangible changes taking place, illustrating the country's commitment to executing its ambitious vision. When I first encountered Vision 2030 in 2021 during a French delegation business trip to KSA , it seemed ambitious. However, witnessing its execution firsthand fills me with energy and optimism. In healthcare, Sanofi is aligned with the priorities set by the government, particularly in local manufacturing and research and development. We are currently working on significant projects to locally manufacture insulin and vaccines, which underscores the importance Saudi Arabia holds within our company. For instance, Saudi Arabia will soon become one of only a handful of countries where we manufacture vaccines, reflecting its strategic significance. Moreover, our commitment is evident through the establishment of our regional head office in Saudi Arabia, demonstrating our dedication to supporting the country's healthcare ecosystem. The Saudi authorities have created an enabling environment for investment, which aligns with Sanofi's mission to bring innovation to the forefront of healthcare. As a result, we see Saudi Arabia not just as a market but as a pioneer of new solutions in the region. I am confident that Saudi Arabia will continue to grow in importance, attracting more companies to invest in its promising healthcare landscape.

How do you incorporate diversity, equity, and inclusion in your talent acquisition, development, and retention strategy?

The diversity within our organization, especially in terms of nationality, brings a dynamic richness to our operations. Our management committee, for instance, comprises 15 members from 13 different nationalities, which fosters diverse perspectives and enriches discussions. Regarding gender diversity, while we've made significant progress, with 43 percent representation, there's still room for improvement, especially in terms of women in managerial roles. However, we're steadily advancing, and diversity remains a top priority for us, underscored by my role in chairing the Diversity Committee.

In Saudi Arabia, where international recruitment was initially challenging, we've seen a notable shift towards hiring more Saudi nationals, reflecting our commitment to local talent development. Moving forward, our focus is on accelerating the development of our Saudi employees to prepare them for leadership positions as our operations expand. We're also leveraging partnerships with educational institutions in Saudi Arabia to bolster our talent pipeline.

See more interviews