Ashraf Daoud – General Manager, AbbVie Saudi Arabia



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Ashraf Daoud lays out how AbbVie is fully aligned with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, focusing on innovation, partnerships with governmental bodies, and local talent development to drive healthcare transformation. He explains why the establishment of AbbVie's regional headquarters in Saudi Arabia highlights the country's importance in the Middle East, aiming to leverage local opportunities and support the wider region's healthcare advancements, and how AbbVie's collaboration with the Saudi Food and Drug Authority (SFDA) has helped streamline the regulatory process, allowing faster approval of innovative treatments, while clinical trial opportunities have also been enhanced.

Could you provide an update on AbbVie's progress in Saudi Arabia since our last interview in 2021, particularly regarding its positioning and achievements within the country?

Since our last meeting, AbbVie has made significant strides in Saudi Arabia. Our alignment with the country's Vision 2030 remains steadfast, reflecting our commitment as a foreign investor. We've engaged extensively with governmental bodies to accelerate the transformation process, aligning with the nation's agenda.

Specifically for AbbVie, we're proud to have received numerous internal prestigious awards, recognizing our exemplary performance in bringing new innovative medicines to the Saudi market.

This acknowledgement marks a significant achievement for our Saudi affiliate and underscores our dedication to making a lasting impact. Additionally, we've been consistently recognized as a great place to work in Saudi Arabia for the past decade, a testament to our ongoing efforts in fostering a supportive and inclusive workplace culture.

AbbVie's commitment to equity, equality, diversity, and inclusion (EED&I) has been globally acknowledged, further highlighting our dedication to fostering an environment of belonging and opportunity. Furthermore, our innovative approach has led to the development of groundbreaking treatments, such as our product for atopic dermatitis, which has garnered recognition from the Guinness World Records for disease awareness and patient engagement in Saudi. Overall, our focus remains on elevating the standard of care and making a positive impact for patients in Saudi Arabia.

With the recent inauguration of AbbVie's regional headquarters in Saudi Arabia, how has your role shifted as the head of both AbbVie Saudi and the Regional Headquarters?

The establishment of our Regional Headquarters in Saudi Arabia marks a significant milestone, not just for AbbVie Saudi, but for our operations across the Middle East. This initiative stems from the Saudi government's commitment to Vision 2030 and their recognition of Saudi Arabia's pivotal role as a major contributor to businesses in the region. The government's support and collaboration have been instrumental in facilitating this transition. By strategically positioning Regional Headquarters in Saudi Arabia, the aim is to leverage the unique capabilities and opportunities present.

This approach reflects our commitment to innovation and advancing healthcare solutions throughout the Middle East. The collaborative dialogue with the government, not only benefiting AbbVie but also the broader industry, has paved the way for progress and success in our endeavors. As we witness most operations transitioning to our new regional headquarters, I am confident in the positive impact this move will have on our ability to drive innovation and serve the needs of patients across the region.

What measures do you believe are necessary to encourage more investors to establish their headquarters in Saudi Arabia?

It’s true that for larger companies like AbbVie, the establishment of regional headquarters in Saudi Arabia has been a positive step forward. However, we acknowledge that smaller and medium-sized enterprises may encounter different challenges in this regard. Encouraging more investors to set up their headquarters here requires a concerted effort to highlight the strong capabilities and high-caliber talent available in Saudi Arabia.

The ongoing infrastructure development in the country plays a crucial role in attracting investors by showcasing the conducive environment for business growth. Collaborative efforts between the private sector and governmental bodies are essential in addressing any hurdles and fostering a supportive ecosystem for all businesses, regardless of size. Ultimately, it’s about showcasing the potential and opportunities that exist in Saudi Arabia to attract a diverse range of investors.

What are the main agenda items you are advocating for as chairman of the Saudi Pharma Trade Association (RPCC)?

Following my term as chairman of the trade association in Saudi Arabia for three years, including 2023, I have transitioned to the role of vice-chair, effective January 2024. Over the past few years, our focus within the Pharma Trade Association has remained consistent, revolving around three strategic priorities.

Firstly, we’ve been dedicated to strengthening partnerships with governmental stakeholders to enhance innovation in the Kingdom’s healthcare sector. This involves initiatives such as facilitating advanced clinical trials and introducing innovative therapies to address complex diseases.

Secondly, we’ve prioritized the development of local capabilities, aligning with the goals of Saudization and normalization. While transitioning roles from expatriates to Saudi nationals is crucial, we emphasize the importance of ensuring a smooth and effective transition process. This entails building capabilities hand in hand with the government to avoid disruptions and maintain industry stability.

Lastly, we’re committed to upholding the principles of Saudization while recognizing the need for a phased approach to implementation. Our collaboration with governmental bodies has been instrumental in fostering understanding and alignment on these key priorities. Ultimately, our goal is to ensure a sustainable and thriving pharmaceutical industry in Saudi Arabia.

What is driving AbbVie’s success in product launches in Saudi Arabia? Is it a result of changes within the regulatory framework, a shift in AbbVie’s strategy, or perhaps the alignment of your pipeline with the needs of the Saudi population?

As a research-focused company, it’s our responsibility to bring the most advanced and innovative medicines to patients here. A significant factor contributing to our success is the alignment and collaboration with the Saudi Food and Drug Authority (SFDA). They’ve implemented platforms such as accelerated and bridge pathways, allowing for faster registration of truly innovative products. This partnership with SFDA has streamlined the regulatory process, ensuring that innovative treatments reach patients swiftly.

However, gaining regulatory approval is just the first step. Ensuring access to these innovative products is equally crucial. While SFDA has made significant strides, there’s still work to be done to replicate this speed in the formulary process across various healthcare accounts. This includes government entities like the Ministry of Defense, National Guard, and universities. Accelerating the research hub in the country is another vital aspect. While we’ve made progress, there’s a continued need to develop capabilities to facilitate more Phase 2 and Phase 1 clinical studies. This requires advanced infrastructure and expertise, which we’re committed to building in collaboration with stakeholders.

Overall, it’s a multifaceted effort involving regulatory advancements, strategic alignment, and capability development, all aimed at ensuring that innovative treatments reach those who need them most in Saudi Arabia.

As a representative of a major American innovative company, advocating for increased clinical research in Saudi Arabia requires addressing various logistical and operational aspects. What measures need to be put in place within Saudi to realistically attract more clinical research to the country?

Advancing clinical research in Saudi Arabia requires a comprehensive approach, considering factors such as timelines, logistical challenges, and operational efficiencies. It’s crucial to ensure robust logistical steps and standard operating procedures (SOPs) to streamline the clinical trial process. This includes addressing potential delays that could arise from any participating country within a multicentral trial. While Saudi Arabia is already a member of world-class clinical trials, the focus now needs to shift towards enhancing capabilities for Phase 1 and Phase 2 studies. This involves developing partnerships with individual investigators, hospitals, and data management

entities to address pain points and improve efficiency.

Additionally, I believe it’s essential to highlight the role of digital transformation in healthcare innovation. Digital health presents a significant opportunity to revolutionize patient care and access to services. However, implementing effective digital health solutions requires building the right capabilities and infrastructure. This involves leveraging digitalization to enhance access to care, improve service quality, and ultimately transform the healthcare landscape in Saudi Arabia. By embracing digital transformation, we can unlock new possibilities and drive meaningful advancements in patient care and research.

In 2021, we discussed AbbVie’s acquisition of Allergan, which expanded its therapeutic areas significantly. Has AbbVie had to work on changing perceptions of its portfolio among stakeholders in Saudi Arabia? How do you educate stakeholders about AbbVie’s evolving identity and future prospects, especially with new therapeutic areas like HIV research on the horizon?

The acquisition of Allergan in 2020 marked a significant expansion of AbbVie’s portfolio, introducing new therapeutic areas such as neuroscience, aesthetics, and eye care. This diversification has necessitated a concerted effort to educate stakeholders in Saudi Arabia about AbbVie’s evolving identity and future prospects.

Our approach has been multifaceted. Firstly, we emphasize the innovative nature of our expanded portfolio, highlighting advancements in areas like migraine treatment, eye care therapies, and aesthetic solutions such as Botox and Juvéderm. Through educational initiatives, collaborations with healthcare professionals, and engagement with regulatory bodies, we aim to showcase the transformative impact of our expanded portfolio on patient care.

Furthermore, our recent acquisitions of companies like ImmunoGen and Cerevel Therapeutics have further strengthened our presence in immunology and oncology, signalling our commitment to addressing a broader range of medical needs. We are actively communicating these developments to stakeholders, demonstrating how AbbVie’s expanded capabilities align with the goals of Vision 2030 and contribute to advancing healthcare in Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, our investment in hiring Saudi employees and expanding our clinical research infrastructure underscores our dedication to building local capabilities and fostering innovation within the Kingdom. This not only supports our business growth but also enhances Saudi Arabia’s

position as a hub for cutting-edge research and healthcare innovation.

In summary, while our portfolio has evolved significantly, our commitment to delivering innovative therapies remains unwavering. Through proactive communication, collaboration, and investment in local talent and infrastructure, we are confident in our ability to navigate this dynamic landscape and continue driving positive impact for patients in Saudi Arabia.

Maintaining company culture amidst global expansion, especially with mergers and acquisitions, can be quite challenging. Could you shed some light on what defines the AbbVie culture and how it differs, if at all, from the AbbVie Saudi culture? Furthermore, how do you navigate the complexities of merging and developing cultures amidst all these changes?

Ensuring a conducive culture for employees to thrive is paramount, particularly during integration phases. We approach this through structured processes, such as surveys involving both teams to understand their cultural nuances. It’s crucial to avoid imposing a singular culture but rather to amalgamate the best from each. Our comprehensive culture platform involves representatives from both entities, ensuring inclusivity. Through quarterly follow-ups and initiatives like informal leadership breakfasts, we foster open dialogue. Additionally, external hires undergo extensive feedback sessions to align with our culture. Internally, our global culture survey and competitions help gauge and enhance our cultural fabric. With a diverse culture team spanning regions, we ensure all voices are heard, promoting a dynamic and evolving culture that resonates across our affiliates.

Given your evident passion for this role, what are your aspirations for the next few years?

I see my role in two parts: industry-wide transformation and AbbVie’s growth. Firstly, in contributing to Saudi’s pharma sector, it’s crucial to enhance capabilities, uphold IP rights and support the enforcement of intellectual property rights, fostering innovation and access. Our successful efforts have removed Saudi from IP watch lists, attracting more innovation.

Secondly, with AbbVie, integrating acquisitions like Allergan and Immunogen, we aim to introduce their innovative medications to Saudi, emphasizing value to stakeholders. By advancing both industry capabilities and AbbVie’s presence, we hope to leave a long-lasting impact in the coming

years.

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