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Now is the time to invest in Saudi Arabia's growing research and healthcare landscape

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Saudi Arabia is rapidly shaping its future as a global research powerhouse, channelling unprecedented resources into translational research, clinical trials, and genomics. At the heart of this transformation is the Saudi NIH, driving 13 key research priorities and forging strategic global partnerships. Speaking at The Global Healthspan Summit (GHS 2025) in Riyadh, Dr. Majed AlJeraisy unveils how these efforts are not only redefining the country's scientific landscape but also positioning it as a critical player in precision medicine and pharmaceutical innovation.

What is the mandate of the Saudi NIH, and how does your role contribute to its mission?

The Saudi National Institute of Health (Saudi NIH) was established under the directives of the Supreme Committee and the Royal Cabinet to spearhead translational research and clinical trials, positioning Saudi Arabia at the forefront of biomedical innovation. Our mission is threefold: to fund and support groundbreaking research, translate scientific discoveries into tangible outcomes, and develop sustainable funding mechanisms that ensure long-term impact.

As Executive Director of Research, I oversee the Research Office and the Education & Training Department, playing a pivotal role in shaping funding strategies, regulatory frameworks, and research governance. One of our most significant undertakings is the definition of national research

priorities, a process driven by extensive collaboration with Saudi research institutions, regulatory bodies, the Ministry of Health, and industry stakeholders, including pharmaceutical sponsors. Through these partnerships, we have identified 13 key research domains, ensuring that resources are directed toward the most pressing scientific and healthcare challenges.

Beyond funding, a critical aspect of our work is establishing a structured, transparent research ecosystem. Unlike traditional models where funds are allocated directly to investigators, we implement a three-party agreement framework, engaging institutions to enhance accountability, streamline administration, and foster long-term institutional commitment to research excellence. This approach ensures that Saudi NIH's efforts are not only impactful but also strategically aligned with the nation's broader scientific and healthcare ambitions.

How is the Saudi NIH advancing research through global collaboration and strategic priorities?

The Saudi National Institute of Health (Saudi NIH) operates as a national funding and research-enabling entity, rather than conducting research directly or developing infrastructure. To drive meaningful progress, we engage with leading global institutions, including the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH), the UK's National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), and similar organizations in Korea, Singapore, and Australia. These collaborations allow us to integrate international best practices, refine our strategic approach, and position Saudi Arabia as a key player in the global research landscape.

The national research strategy, recently approved by the Supreme Committee—chaired by the Minister of Health and comprising representatives from major regulatory and economic bodies—establishes a structured framework to elevate Saudi Arabia's research capabilities. This framework is built on four core principles that guide our efforts: strengthening research institutions to enhance clinical trials and translational research, ensuring a structured and sustainable funding ecosystem for research centers and investigators, prioritizing the transformation of research into tangible impact rather than focusing solely on academic publications, and fostering long-term benefits for both the healthcare sector and the broader economy.

Rather than duplicating efforts, Saudi NIH focuses on adapting proven global models while aligning research investments with national priorities. Each initiative is governed by defined performance metrics to ensure research is not only well-funded but also efficiently translated into real-world applications. Through this approach, Saudi Arabia is establishing itself as a leader in medical

research, bridging scientific advancements with tangible societal benefits while strengthening its position within the international research community.

What are the Saudi NIH's priority research areas, and how are they being developed?

Given the expansive nature of scientific research, the Saudi National Institute of Health (Saudi NIH) has established 13 key research priorities, identified through extensive collaboration with stakeholders across government, academia, and industry. To ensure that resources are directed toward the most pressing healthcare challenges, we are working with a consulting firm to further refine these priorities, using a rigorous, data-driven approach.

The evaluation is based on three fundamental criteria: the economic burden of diseases, their impact on healthcare policy, and the severity of their complications. Conditions such as cardiovascular disease, obesity, and complex diabetes, which have profound implications for both public health and national healthcare expenditures, are central to this assessment. A detailed analysis of healthcare spending associated with these diseases is underway, allowing us to align research funding with both economic sustainability and long-term healthcare improvements.

Our research strategy is designed as a five-year roadmap, beginning in 2025 with targeted funding for the top 20% of identified priorities, gradually increasing support by 20% each year until all 13 programs are fully funded by 2029. While this structured framework provides a clear strategic direction, it remains adaptable, ensuring we can pivot resources toward emerging health challenges as needed. By combining evidence-based decision-making with strategic adaptability, Saudi NIH is positioning itself as a global leader in translational research and clinical innovation, ensuring that scientific advancements translate into meaningful, real-world impact.

Why is Saudi Arabia becoming a key destination for clinical research and pharmaceutical investment?

Saudi Arabia is emerging as a pivotal hub for clinical research, driven by a robust healthcare infrastructure, world-class researchers, and strong government commitment to advancing clinical trials and translational research. A growing number of universities and medical institutions are prioritizing clinical research, reflecting a broader national strategy to position Saudi Arabia at the forefront of global medical innovation.

While the country’s clinical research infrastructure is still evolving, substantial efforts are underway to enhance its capabilities. The Saudi NIH’s Clinical Trials Department, backed by government funding, is spearheading initiatives to elevate research standards. This includes supporting five Centers of Excellence, equipping them to meet international benchmarks, and developing ten additional research centers to expand capacity. These initiatives aim to accelerate Saudi Arabia’s ability to conduct large-scale, high-quality clinical trials, reinforcing its role as a key player in global biomedical research.

Beyond infrastructure, Saudi Arabia offers distinct research opportunities, particularly in non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disorders, and hyperlipidemia, which are highly prevalent in the population. However, the most compelling opportunity for pharmaceutical investment lies in rare genetic diseases, where Saudi Arabia holds a unique position. Due to the high rate of consanguinity, the country has an elevated incidence of genetic disorders, creating an exceptional landscape for gene therapy, biologics, and advanced therapeutics.

Thalassemia, for instance, is a condition with a notably high prevalence in Saudi Arabia. Experts suggest that a concerted focus on thalassemia alone could attract significant investment from the pharmaceutical industry, as innovative treatments such as gene therapy and biologics represent the only viable solutions. This extends beyond thalassemia, as the country’s genetic disease profile presents an unprecedented opportunity for biotech companies specializing in orphan drugs, personalized medicine, and next-generation therapies.

With an evolving research ecosystem, a progressive regulatory framework, and a national commitment to fostering medical innovation, Saudi Arabia is positioning itself as a leading destination for pharmaceutical companies, biotech firms, and research institutions seeking to drive groundbreaking advancements in healthcare.

How is the Saudi NIH advancing genomics, and why should international investors engage with Saudi Arabia’s research ecosystem?

Genomics is a key priority for the Saudi NIH, particularly in the study of genetic and rare diseases, where Saudi Arabia has a unique research advantage. Beyond funding clinical trials, we actively support genomic platforms, institutional initiatives, and strategic collaborations to drive advancements in this field. Our approach ensures that genomic research translates into practical applications in diagnostics, precision medicine, and therapeutic development.

Saudi Arabia is rapidly expanding its capabilities in genomic medicine and personalized healthcare, backed by strong government support and a growing research ecosystem. With its commitment to biomedical innovation and translational research, the country presents a compelling opportunity for pharmaceutical companies, biotech firms, and global research institutions looking to invest in cutting-edge medical advancements. Now is the time to engage with this dynamic and evolving research landscape.

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