Mohammed Zafrullah – VP & GM GCC & Levant, GSK Pharmaceuticals, UAE



To have a successful business, you need to be here for the long haul

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Mohammed Zafrullah, VP & General Manager of GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) Pharmaceuticals, argues that the UAE, despite recent turmoil in the rest of the Middle East, is the perfect emerging country to do build a business in due to the many opportunities for innovation and growth.

Across the world, GSK is recognized for its expertise in vaccines and respiratory medicines. What are the most relevant therapeutic areas that are driving your growth in this region?

You are right, GSK is a global player in respiratory and vaccines and that is no different at the regional level here either. However, in this region we also have a strong presence in antibiotics, CNS, dermatology, anaesthesia, thrombosis etc. Our oncology and haematology portfolio is also growing. We are excited about the R&D pipeline which will further augment the portfolio.

The Middle East has not typically been regarded as a great place to do business due to political and economic instability. What is your perception of government cooperation in these countries today in order to attract foreign companies to these markets?

On the contrary, the Middle East is a great place to do business. You just have to look out from the window of my office and you will see an amazing spectacle. If you last came to Dubai 10 years ago, you would not believe your eyes. What this country, United Arab Emirates has achieved in such a short period of time is truly exceptional. This is the result of the vision of the leadership of this country. And, they haven't done this without private overseas investment, which has come from all parts of the world. You see similar things beyond UAE in the region. Yes, there are issues but at the same time we have to appreciate the resilience of people in this region, we always bounce back. These are emerging markets, so don't expect smooth sailing. Resilience is the key word.

To have a successful business, you need to be here for the long haul. GSK has been in this region for over half a century. Hence, it is no surprise we have a strong legacy. Over the years, we have managed to build strong partnerships not just with healthcare authorities but also our business partners. There is trust in these relationships in the true sense of the word and this has been developed over the years on the basis of transparency and open communication. Trust takes years to build but can be broken in an instant so this is something we protect, no matter what. The success of our relationships is also reflected by our leading market position across many countries in the region and beyond in the wider Middle East and Africa. GSK also has a strong legacy in terms of local manufacturing and are looking to bolster that presence where economies of scale justify. We have a local manufacturing set-up in Saudi Arabia and GSK is now the first multinational company to be locally packaging our products in Iraq through a third party local manufacturer. We always look to building our business for the long term. This requires patience, hard work and making short term compromises. This is exactly what our predecessors did, the fruits of which we are now enjoying. I would like to think that the next generation of managers will say the same thing about us.

One of the main challenges for pharmaceutical companies in the Middle East is the recruitment of skilled local talent. What approaches has GSK taken to attract local talent?

We are working very hard in this area. We are delighted that we have not had a major retention issue with the local talent we have recruited. We have successfully done this by offering long term career opportunities, giving them varied experiences in different areas of business and a friendly organizational culture. Can we do more? Of course we can and we are proactively working on it. We have also started a local internship program where we are looking to give local university students a structured work experience program. Hopefully, they will become GSK ambassadors when they

return to their universities and this would also facilitate our endeavours to attract local talent.

What was your vision for GSK in the region when you took on this role as head of the Gulf and Levant countries in early 2012?

Our core strategy is geared towards meeting the needs of patients and the healthcare providers, and our business strategies are aligned accordingly. Our vision is to continue to build on our significant presence in the region and to bring GSK innovative products. This will surely be facilitated by an efficient registration framework that already exists in many of our countries. GSK has been present in GCC Levant markets for over 50 years and we would like to believe that we are seen as partners of choice by the healthcare authorities rather than just suppliers of medicines. We would also like to believe that we have played an important role in improving awareness of healthcare professionals in a number of diseases, which is something we will continue to strive for in the years to come in the most ethical manner. The region is expanding with governments looking all the time to improve quality of healthcare for its population. At GSK, we are proud to be playing our role by bringing to the table professional expertise and innovation. GSK has a strong pipeline coming through its R&D organization and over the coming years we will be launching a number of new molecules supporting patients and the healthcare community in the areas of asthma, oncology, vaccines etc. Additionally we are expecting products for disease areas where currently there are no treatments available. These are exciting times at GSK and we are confident of the future that lies ahead. The Company will continue to invest in what is one of the fastest growing regions of the world.

Having served in senior financial roles your entire career, what lessons did those experiences provide you to take on a commercial management role, and what challenges did you experience?

Yes, I do have a finance background and in my previous role I was heading up the Finance function for Middle East and Africa, based at our headquarters in London and later Dubai. I moved into General Management in 2007. I would agree that the two roles are quite different but in GSK the commercial finance roles are very business focused. This certainly helped me in transitioning into the commercial role. The main challenge always is to move out of your comfort zone and I made a conscious effort to learn more about areas that I needed to understand to do justice to the new challenge. Five years on, I believe I made the right call. I am thoroughly enjoying the challenge and

would like to believe that with the support of the team we have at GSK, we are doing what is best for the patients, for the community, and for the Company.

Given your success thus far, what would you like to achieve next for GSK in this region?

I would like to do more for the patients, especially in disease areas where there are no treatments available, by fast tracking the introduction of new molecules in the coming years. People are our most important asset. We will look to provide opportunities to people locally and continue to develop and groom talent. This region is well respected for exporting talent and our vision is to continue to build an even stronger ‘people pipeline’ in our region. I would not be surprised if one day we have a CEO who comes from this part of the world.

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