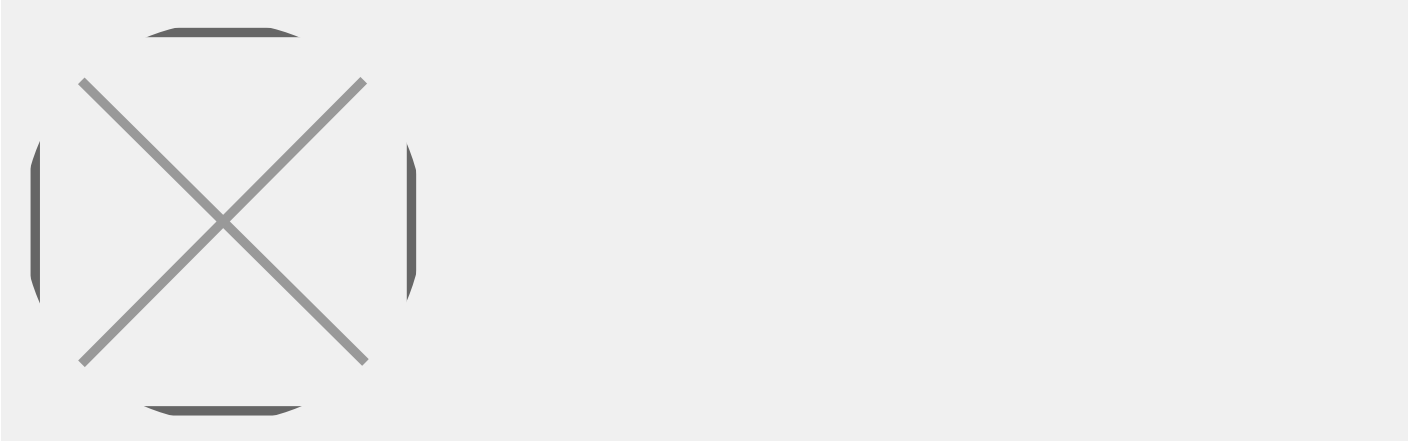
Interview: Karim El-Alaoui Mustapha, Managing Director MENA, Boehringer Ingelheim, UAE



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Karim El-Alaoui Mustapha, Managing Diretor of Boehringer Ingelheim, MENA, talks about the company's two-fold strategy in attracting, and maintaining, talent; what have been the key successes since it's founding; and what the future aspirations are for the company.

As the head of Boehringer Ingelheim (BI) in the Middle East, to what do you owe the company's great success in this region over the last couple of years?

We are certainly proud of ourselves regarding the results we achieved in 2012, which is a clear reflection of our strategy we designed for the Middle East/North Africa region at the beginning of 2010. These results were entirely the outcome of the extra effort we put in place in terms of investing in branding and medical education programs across the region. Given that Dubai is serving as the head office, the strategy is designed here and then implemented locally in each market. We strongly believe that local people have a better understanding of their markets therefore we encourage them to follow their own implementation process to excel in execution.

Beyond developing the business, we have also invested a great deal in honoring the people behind the business. With new challenges and ideas, we like to keep our people motivated so that they can be active drivers of change. We will continue to implement the strategy we developed in 2010 and fine-tune the areas that still need some improvement.

As part of your strategy, BI has been prioritizing certain therapeutic areas. Within your portfolio, what are the priorities today?

If you look at the prevalence of the diseases in this region, it is evident that diabetes and cardiovascular are the major diseases that we need to focus on. According to our pipeline we will not miss any kind of opportunity regarding cardiovascular products, an area in which we are well known as one of a leading pharmaceutical company. Moreover, when it comes to cardiovascular disease treatments, BI has a wide variety of products that we plan to launch in this region in the near future.

We are currently working on a plan and have already set a timeframe to ensure the sequential launches of the most prevalent diseases in the region. Recently we managed to launch products *like Twynsta for Hypertension in Lebanon and* Kuwait a*nd Spiriva Respimat for Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease in the UAE and Lebanon.*

Regarding diabetes, BI has established a global alliance with Lilly through which we jointly market *Trajenta* as the first by Alliance in the region. Up until now we launched it in Lebanon, the UAE and Kuwait. We have plans to introduce this product in other Middle Eastern markets in the coming months. After this launch we will gradually bring in the rest of the products under the alliance with Lilly.

What are the advantages that BI has obtained from this partnership with Lilly, specifically here in the Middle East?

The main objective of this alliance is to make sure that we can provide medications to the patients who need it. By joining forces we will be able to demonstrate that 1 + 1 = 3, in the sense that more investments will be made in the field of diabetes. Regarding the sales-force, it will also be bolstered and essentially doubled as both companies will be working together to ensure that more patients have access to these products.

Yes, the market is competitive at the moment, but at the same time people need medication. The existing products are efficient, but the disease is progressive. The doctors and society are waiting for products that can really help prevent or stop the progression of these diseases. The next step will be to develop new and differentiated products that are available today.

Essential to curbing the progression of diabetes is the need to raise awareness about the disease. How can we make sure that investments of this kind also take place?

The reality is that as long as companies are enhancing their diabetes portfolios, naturally, they would like to generate awareness around it. However, industry initiatives are not sufficient; in fact, they will never be enough because it all has to be done in partnership with the Ministries of Health and medical community of the countries we operate in. The key to effective awareness is to work with the support and hand-in-hand with local authorities so that we can tackle the disease on all fronts.

Do the governments in the Middle East recognize this need?

Luckily they do, and they have been very helpful in bringing the disease to the forefront of medical issues. Today, it is a common practice to read several articles on diabetes in all the major newspapers and the disease's impact on the society at all levels. Moreover when the UAE hosted the International Diabetes Federation (IDF) last year, the event was a clear demonstration of how the country is committed towards fighting the disease. The private sector has to do a lot when it comes to awareness and the government also has to continue what they are doing.

How can the UAE serve as a model for the rest of the region in terms of revamping its healthcare sector?

First of all, the country has been incredibly successful in its strategy and vision for economic and social development. Overall, the government has created an environment that welcomes investors and is open to international companies. This has all been possible due to the country's economic and political stability, as well as fiscal incentives and investment-friendly regulations.

Regarding the pharmaceutical industry, the UAE model is successful because access to the market is easy with relatively speedy product registration. I do not mean that other countries are not, but with a more developed system things can go faster. Ultimately, this is the perfect environment that a pharmaceutical company is looking for in order to come, invest and develop.

Within BI's global focus on emerging markets, how are you positioning the Middle East region in order to attract the attention and investment it deserves?

The concept of emerging markets is relatively new for our company. Initially our focus was in Europe, USA and Japan, and only later did we realize that we should open our eyes towards the emerging markets where growth was much faster. The large blocks of emerging markets will remain big blocks because there are plenty of opportunities. China will remain the first market to look at and we are still at the beginning of our development in China. The second block to look at is Russia, followed by India,

Latin America is a nice and diverse block and for the time being it remains the number one block in terms of its global contribution to BI Emerging Market Region. Lastly, there are some areas that I call *white spots*, which have never been the focus for the industry. Typically, these are markets in Africa, excluding North Africa and South Africa. White spots mean a lot of challenges but at the same time a lot of opportunities. Thinking about the Middle East, this region could have been considered a white spot in the past, but has now become a focus for BI.

It is now clear that all companies are looking at this region for big opportunities. We are in a phase now where we really need to move faster in terms of investments, products to be launched, developing people and creating our different legal entities in the region. The board of managing directors believes in our potential and they want to help us more and more. There are clear indications from the corporation that they believe in our region and want to continue investing in it. There are plenty of opportunities available in the region and one should focus on the peculiarities and not instability.

Speaking about investments, what are the prospects for clinical research here in the Middle East?

Back in 2010, we made a conscious decision to look at the potential of the Middle East for clinical research. We found that there are some countries where the infrastructure is very well developed and up to par with other global clinical research centres. BI was receptive to our findings and supported the idea of bringing a few trials. We selected two main disease areas of oncology and diabetes due to their high prevalence rates in the region. This is only our incursion into clinical research in these markets, and we are excited because we still see great potential to develop further trials in the future.

You earlier spoke about the need to build people and especially local talent. How has this been progressing for your Middle East operations?

When we established our growth strategy back in 2010, we defined our two main objectives as 1) excelling within our key therapeutic areas and 2) being recognized as the best company to work for. In order to fulfil this, we need to create an environment that allows for this to happen.

So far we see positive signs in attracting talented people who are interested in coming and joining our BI Middle East office. Beyond attracting them, we also like to ensure that they are happy within the company and stay with us because they see a bright future for themselves. For this reason, we tailor development programs for our employees depending on their aspiration and their interests. We do this through training programs and flexible career paths that are offered to all our people.

Providing these options requires huge investments, but it is worth investing this money because we are looking at the long term, and if I want to secure the long term this is the only way you can really capture talented people. We have a lot of talented people within this region and we are already developing them under the BI mindset so that we can be considered a great place to work in.

As a relatively newcomer to this region, what are your expectations for BI in the Middle East for the coming years?

My expectation for BI is that it carries on believing in the potential of the region. We must continue investing as much as we have and even beyond that. We also need to commit to clinical trials because we strongly believe this is the right time and place to start developing this kind of research here. Finally, I look forward to employing more talented people in order to grow our structure. My dream is to make BI one of the top ten players of this region. Indeed, the UAE is an inspiration to achieve great things, as they have managed a formidable transformation of their country. With this in mind, I like to think that tomorrow will always be better.

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