Interview with Lucio Rispo, Strategic Research Director of Qatar Science & Technology Park, Qatar Science and Technology Park

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Tags: Qatar Science and Technology Park

What was the vision behind the creation of the Qatar Science and Technology Park in 2006—what was then a $600Mn first-phase investment?

Qatar Foundation, and Qatar Science and Technology Park as a member of QF are helping Qatar on its journey from a hydrocarbon based economy to a knowledge based economy. QSTP is helping to bring the world's best researchers, entrepreneurs and inventors together in a collaborative environment to 'invent the future'. With our state of the art facilities and many of the world's leading corporations working together we are creating technologies that will help people everywhere to live better more productive lives. I personally was not here at QSTP's founding in 2006, but even since my arrival in 2009 the change and progress we've made has been tremendous. With translational and applied research as our guiding principle we are both facilitating technology and knowledge transfer to the state of Qatar and exporting the products of Qatar's ingenuity to the region and the world.

What have been the principal milestones and accomplishments of the Park since you took on your role in 2009—particularly in the field of pharmaceuticals and life sciences?

We have accomplished a lot in the last three years. For instance, we developed the Qatar Robotic Surgery Center, an outstanding facility that has helped us train more than 250 surgeons by

applying the benefits of this equipment to traditional instruction methods. The improvement to the standard of care that is now possible in Qatar is unbelievable. The fact that students from Weil Cornell Medical College in Qatar have the opportunity to practice using our facility and equipment and that it is becoming a part of their curriculum, is an amazing achievement. Last but not least, we are conducting research projects in collaboration and partnership with noted institutions like the Imperial College of London.

A few weeks ago, we received a request to participate in a symposium and deliver a speech about our work at QSTP. Only a few years ago, no one would consider inviting Qatari researchers to present their work at such a significant event. Today, the global community has asked us to present our findings. This is a huge reward for our efforts and a validation of our vision.

QSTP works on the basis of a free zone. Can you elaborate on the advantages of this status, for our readers who are perhaps deliberating between participation in this center and participation in a similar facility in another country in the Gulf region?

Firstly, from a personal perspective I would like to say that QSTP is a truly wonderful, state-of-the-art facility to work in. Surrounded by some of the world's brightest minds and most inspiring talent, it is truly a joy to come to work. QSTP is also an integral part of a wider community. It is a member of Qatar Foundation, and as such companies working within QSTP have easy access to Hamad Bin Khalifa University. There are examples of some that have facilitated collaboration with institutions like Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar, Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar and Qatar University. QSTP also enables companies to operate within a free zone, which provides for the opportunity of taking full ownership of IP, and to enjoy the other advantages that a free zone can offer. It is very rare to find these advantages all together in a single place. QSTP is truly a 'one-stop shop.'

The Qatar Robotic Surgery Centre is an undertaking on which you have collaborated with Hamad Medical Corporation. Can you further expound upon this program?

At QRSC, we essentially work in two directions: technical training, and research. The partnership between HMC and QSTP is very strong, as the director of the QRSC— Dr. Abdulla Al Ansari—is also the chairman of surgery at HMC. Dr. Al Ansari is very clear on what he requires from a clinical perspective, as he is a clinician and a surgeon. Dr. Al Ansari knows what I cannot know—and I therefore have a strong source of reference in him. We also work with the International Surgical Panel, which offers us a wonderful advisory board from all over the world that can help us improve our program. As a part of the QRSC, we work on a range of interesting projects, which are

appreciated worldwide. I mentioned earlier that we have been asked to deliver a speech at a major international symposium about our work. This means that what we are contributing to the global discussion in the field. Moreover, we are stimulating ideas and research in niches like the use of robots for orthopedic surgery; or in the use of artificial intelligence for image analysis, to help the surgeon better understand, for instance, when and how deep he must cut in the case of a cancerous tumor.

At QRSC, we are looking at the future of surgery today.

What do you believe this line of work says about Qatar's willingness to lead medical research in the Gulf?

I believe that Qatar is truly becoming a leader in this field. Given the commitment and passion of our people and the significant resources that have been committed, Qatar is sincerely striving toward this goal.

Can you tell our readers a bit about the RASAD platform, and how this project has developed over time?

In 2009, we received a request to develop a platform that could support research in diabetes and cardiovascular disease. It was simply a request; simply an idea. Based on this humble beginning, we developed RASAD. We could not imagine four years ago, that today we would become a supplier for the UK, for Europe, for the U.S. It is absolutely incredible! The range of applications of RASAD is very wide.

You earlier mentioned your work with a number of universities. However, do you feel that this collaboration can lead to a brain drain from Qatar to other countries?

We are very fortunate at QSTP to have a number of the world's leading Universities on our doorstep. From Georgetown University in Qatar to Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar and Texas A&M at Qatar, Qatar Foundation has recruited experts in many critical fields to come teach and do their research in Qatar. So in essence we are experiencing the opposite of a brain drain where knowledge and technology transfer into Qatar is happening all around us. Additionally, QF sponsors an annual Arab Expatriate Scientists Symposium where many of the world's leading Arab scientists return to the region from their various foreign institutions to share their exciting research and projects. Each year this leads to an astonishing number of collaborations that bring cutting edge projects to Qatar and the region.

Where would like to take the operations of QSTP in the next three to four years?

We are on the road to becoming a globally renowned leader in innovation. We are proud of our “invented or discovered in Qatar” brand and hope to become increasingly well known for the life changing discoveries and technologies we enable each and every day. Again, I believe that we are on the right track. Programs like RASAD and the QRSC and the project in bioscience studies that we have worked on together with Qatar University, are all coming alive, becoming globally known, and becoming well respected.

The QSTP has a greater number of companies dedicated to energy rather than to life science. Is the will there to increase your focus on life science research?

Certainly. We are developing programs dedicated to this sector, and working with our partners to foster research in health. We have a dedicated manager for this line of research, and we are working very hard to achieve development in this field. We will soon announce a wonderful program we are taking forward in the field of life sciences, where we have partnered with a large multinational corporation that will change the approach to medicine in a meaningful way.

What is your final message to the international readers of Pharmaceutical Executive?

I believe that we do not have to limit our ambitions. Of course, we would like to lead the Gulf—but we will not stop there. At QSTP we are inventing the future. To organizations looking to develop their operations I say come join us! We are unlocking human potential each day and redefining the way the world will discover new cures, medicines, technologies and inventions. Qatar is on the forefront of a new renaissance in Arab scientific learning and discovery and we at QSTP are excited to have as many global partners as possible join us on this journey.

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