Dr. Karima Sadok – Country Manager, Chiesi, Algeria

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Tags: respiratory disease

The country manager of an Italian pharmaceutical firm talks about the evolution of Algerian health needs and what her firm is doing to counter different forms of respiratory disease prevalent in the country.

After eighteen years at Chiesi, what have been your main successes to date?

On a personal note, I started out with Chiesi right at the bottom of the ladder as a medical delegate. Over time, I rose up the ranking and followed the dream to the point where I am nowadays leading Chiesi's Algerian operations. On a professional level, I have succeeded, with the assistance of my team, in familiarizing the local market with the brand of what was hitherto a virtually unknown laboratory to the extent that today Algerians even know how to correctly pronounce the name "Chiesi." The Italian company's market entry into Algeria actually came about as a result of its global acquisition of the laboratory Jean Logée, a specialist in gastric therapies which had long maintained a presence in Algeria. Chiesi's first actions in Algeria were to enter into collaboration with a local Algerian laboratory called LPA for the manufacturing of spray-style medicines in which we have been transferring technology and know-how.

What then has been keeping you busy?

Very much in line with prevailing government policy, we have been engaging in local manufacturing of anti-inflammatories and spray technologies with Algerian partners such as Pharmethic. We have a range of locally manufactured products in the pipeline and consider it of

high priority to maintain a robust presence in the market.

Right from the very beginning, we were enthusiastic about the forming local partnerships and deeply committed to transferring the sorts of transformative technologies that can really contribute to advancing the level of Algerian healthcare. Our spray technology is an example of this. Our vision has been about much more than merely generating revenue. We are motivated by a desire to really make a difference on the ground. We have, however, had to confront the reality that it is a very slow process in Algeria to acquire registration for new and innovative products and this has been quite disheartening for us.

What was the Algerian market like when Chiesi entered it? And how has the market evolved?

At the time of entry, there were far fewer distributors. This was in some respects inconvenient, but also brought some advantages. The process of selecting partners was much easier for example. Today, the Algerian market is attracting all manner of firms, so to analyze and sort through all the different players and identify the optimum distributors becomes quite a task in itself. Back then, the pharmaceutical sector was pretty much virgin territory so much less regulated and the different actors much more naive. Nowadays the regulatory framework is much more sophisticated. Also a greater number of medicaments are now free-at-the-point-of-delivery and the patients themselves have become more aware and demanding. The local industry as a whole is also much more aligned with international norms and within the next five years should be on a level comparable with many developed nations.

How advantageous is it to have entered the market early on?

It’s actually been quite a few years since Chiesi arrived. During this time, we have gained credibility and been able to build up the trust of both our partners and the broader medical community. Given that our system is not centralized, we conduct our distribution via importers and wholesalers. Nevertheless, thanks to the trust we have built and efficient organisational structures, we now find ourselves covering large part of the Algerian territory.

What is the strategic importance of Chiesi’s Algerian activities to the company’s global and regional operations?

Currently, Chiesi neither possesses a liaison office nor subsidiary in Algeria, but instead work through a provider. Inevitably, this means our product range here in Algeria is fairly limited. From a strategic standpoint, we apply exactly the same message and utilize the same network and tools

as any Chiesi office round the world. From an investment perspective, however, we only have 6 products on the local market, so not yet enough to justifying the establishment of a subsidiary. At the same time, Algeria is regarded by our management as the most attractive market in North Africa and the greater region so there is scope for enhancing our level of engagement.

Despite the current limits to the scope of our operations, we are playing a lead role in the training up of Algerian practitioners through a variety of conferences, seminars and workshops. One notable initiative is the Chiesi pulmonology prize which is awarded to three particular practitioner categories – namely specialists, generalists, and students – the aim of which is to foster greater understanding of this therapeutic area across the medical community. We also work directly with patient associations to help them to organize themselves, to identify their needs, to provide financial support, and to raise awareness about prevention techniques. We similarly engage in dialogue and exchange with learned societies for specific therapeutic areas and assist them in their event coordination and public awareness campaigns.

In view of Algeria's recent epidemiological transition, what can Chiesi deliver to the market that responds to chronic respiratory illnesses?

Well Chiesi is actually the European leader in respiratory treatment, and our new research centre is testament to our sustained willingness to innovate further in this particular therapeutic area. The findings and innovations stemming from this research centre will directly benefit Algeria and we see local market demand for pneumological products as very robust. Some of our current flagship products actually constitute pulmonary medicines for newborns and treatment for chronic asthma.

How do you evaluate the state of human resources in the Algerian pharmaceutical and healthcare industry?

When we first arrived in Algeria, the position of "Medical delegate" was not especially well known and the profession as a whole was rather embryonic. Nowadays, much has changed. The doctors themselves have contributed indirectly to the emergence of various professional categories and the role of medical delegate has become much more established. On the other hand, due to increasing competition and a finite labour pool, it is increasingly difficult to source the sorts of qualified staff for medical visits that possess the necessary commercial awareness, communication skills and a background in pharmacy.

What are your goals for the next five years?

I want to see Chiesi’s full product range placed on the Algerian market. This will be tricky because the product registration procedures are long and complex and there is ordinarily a lag time of several years between the introduction of a new treatment in Europe and its arrival in Algeria. All too often, Algerian doctors misinterpret this and think that international firms are reserving their latest generation products for their home markets. This is not at all the case. We have an intense eagerness to introduce our innovations here in Algeria. My vision is that, just like in Tunisia, the Algerian market can be brought up to date with the very latest products. We will be continuing to push hard for that.

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