Interview: Walid Lakhdar – Country Business Unit Head, Pfizer Tunisia and Libya



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Walid Lakhdar, country business unit head for Tunisia and Libya at Pfizer, stresses the company's ongoing dedication to patients in Tunisia. This was illustrated by the significant investments Pfizer has made in Tunisia after the revolution and still continues to make. Lakhdar talks about Pfizer's successful partnerships in the country with key stakeholders, which positively impact the lives of patients. In addition, he sheds light on Pfizer's commitment to ensuring that patients in Libya have access to life saving medicines regardless of the turmoil in the country.

Mr. Lakhdar, how does Pfizer view its responsibility to the Tunisian people and the country?

Pfizer has had a presence in Tunisia since 1964. Since I joined in 2003, it has been a marvellous journey for Pfizer in Tunisia. Our company has always been dedicated to making quality medicines accessible to the Tunisian patients in order to improve their quality of living.

Tunisia might be a small country geographically on the global scale; however, we never stopped considering it as a significant market with patients that rely on our quality medications. Just after the revolution, Pfizer invested USD two million in its manufacturing site in Tunisia, which demonstrates our commitment to ensuring that patients have accesses to Pfizer's lifesaving medicines. Today, there are 105 employees working for Pfizer Tunisia; all committed to one common mission: working together for a healthier Tunisia. By observing the impact we can have on

a day-to-day basis, we become even more passionate about our purpose. I personally witnessed a family member suffering from a life quality impacting disease and being cured by a Pfizer product. Stories like these are worth the effort we put in every day and make everything that we do worthwhile.

What is Pfizer's partnership strategy in Tunisia and how do you wish to see it evolve in the future?

Partnerships with key stakeholders are something we consider essential for our business. We have already fostered several here in Tunisia which include our long-standing partnership with the state-owned company SIPHAT (*Société des Industries Pharmaceutiques de Tunisie*). We also partner with various local manufacturers with whom we have licencing agreements. Our main goal here, is essentially based on giving access to treatment to Tunisian patients: we engage every day to offer innovative high-quality products and be part of the standard transfer of good manufacturing practice within the pharmaceutical industry.

I believe that partnerships are highly valuable for our patients who always come first. As a matter of fact, I hope that in the future we will expand our partnerships and joint ventures with local players. Agreements between MNCs and local companies allow for cost-division and the diverse backgrounds foster creativity. The remarkable reputation that generics made in Tunisia was achieved through the presence of MNCs, who brought Good Manufacturing Practices and technology to the country. In the future, such collaboration could be the benchmark to develop more drugs, especially in the field of biosimilars. We already partner with some universities to support their research activities; at the same time, we do acknowledge that there is more potential for the development of biosimilars locally. In a few years, the presence of biosimilars in our portfolio will be a valuable asset, not only for the company but also for the patients who will be benefiting from this product category. In this regard, on the behalf of Pfizer and myself, I am confident to say that we have an open mind and are ready for conducive partnerships.

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The public-private dialogue (PPD) has been the subject on which many worries and hopes have been built in Tunisia. What is your assessment on the PPD?

I have to say that in Tunisia, since the beginning of the PPD, regulatory timelines (the time to market) have been significantly reduced and this improvement allowed patients to benefit from our quality medicines. However, we are still struggling with pricing issues. When a company like Pfizer introduces a new product to the market, we meet entry barriers that are too high, especially when

you consider all the initial costs we have to support: innovation, access, marketing and medical education, all represent investments in costs and efforts. In Tunisia we often cannot leverage our investment in time before the first generic hits the market.

Navigating those challenges has taught us to always be flexible and to adapt our portfolio to the country. Pfizer has made a point out of continuing to invest in local manufacturing and will continue to do so in the future because this is essential for our local demographics.

Speaking of manufacturing. Could you talk us through your manufacturing capabilities in Tunisia and the representation of your portfolio in the country?

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Pfizer has been manufacturing in Tunisia for 20 years now, following the highest quality standards. Our capacity is currently at three million units that we are able to produce every year; thanks to the daily commitment of 45 dedicated trained colleagues. Our aim is to remain competitive, to enhance our performance and to be able to respond to the needs of the market in a timely manner. Today, 45 percent of our total revenues in the country are covered by our local production. Since 2008 we also have our own distribution centre, which currently supplies some 52 wholesalers and 1200 pharmacies. It has allowed us to improve our contact with our main customers and reduce delays. This has also enabled us to become better partners for the local economy as a whole, and we have been working very hard to ensure access to our products in Tunisia.

Our portfolio presence in Tunisia is only prescription based and in the fields of cardiovascular diseases, pain, oncology, vaccines, inflammatory and Central Nervous System (CNS). Pfizer Tunisia’s revenue in 2003 was of USD 11 million for the local manufacturing part. Just before the revolution we hit USD 18 million of revenue for Tunisia and Libya, but these numbers have plummeted right after the revolution. However, the manufacturing revenues are now back USD at eight million. In the coming years, CNS and cardiovascular will gain weight in the share of revenues as we will witness a more and more significant shift in the county’s diseases landscape towards the one in place in richer countries.

Pfizer is a highly innovative company, with 15 to 30 products in its pipeline on a global level, all to be launched by 2020. How do you live successful innovation in Tunisia?

At Pfizer, we want every single one of our product launches to be successful. If we launch a product to the market the reason behind this is that it is the best product we have in our pipeline. We bring cutting-edge technology, have strong brand recognition and can guarantee complete safety and

quality for every single one of our launches.

What will be Pfizer Tunisia’s main priorities over the next three to five years?

We will extend a bridge through two main axes: on one hand we will try to extend our partnerships in the country, and on the other hand we will have a plan in place for our direct neighbours in Libya to ensure that our quality medicines are accessible for patients there.

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