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Yahia Aktouf outlines the relationship between Aktouf Medical and Philips Healthcare in Algeria, the evolution of the Algerian medtech market and the potential to bring innovative products to North Africa.

Can you give us an introduction into the Algerian medical equipment market, as well as introduce Aktouf Medical to our international readers?

The Algerian medtech market is composed of some 3,500 private Algerian companies, which is a dramatic increase in size and variety. Our territory is indeed very vast with both the State and private investors committed to developing the health sector through radiology, cardiology, imagery, and a lot of other fields where medical equipment is needed. The evolution between 1997 and now has been very significant in terms of development and healthcare quality.

I founded Aktouf in 1992, which is now composed of a staff of 45, 80 percent of whom are top-level engineers, all certified by Philips. We invest heavily in our engineers, we train them and send them on field missions. Also, although we are focused on training field engineers, we also train our staff on back-office missions, as we have offices in 4 different cities to cover the entirety of the Algerian territory. Finally, let me underline that there are three different levels of certification. Aktouf, as a whole, enjoys a level 2 certification, which is quite rare, and rather logical since Philips knows that

the Algerian market is one of the biggest ones in Africa.

Philips has chosen Aktouf Medical as their exclusive distributor in Algeria. Why do you think Philips chose you as their partner?

They investigated our potential as a partner and figured that our team was an excellent choice in terms of service quality, market understanding, as well as our longstanding experience in imaging systems. They were thorough, as they wanted a company with well-trained staff and strong expertise.

How has Philips' presence in Algeria evolved since they started partnering with Aktouf Medical?

When we first started together, Philips had a very small, almost insignificant share of the market. After four years close partnership, the market share has grown up from 3% to 14%, which is a progression quite significant. We have ensured throughout the years a quality-oriented approach, both in terms of product and associated services, which have met our clients' expectations.

What are the main areas you operate in?

Today, the main areas to address in the country are cancer and cardiology, and we make sure to remain a trusted partner to address these burdens, as a lot remains to be improved on regarding that matter. Especially in interventional cardiology, Philips is a world leader and able to address the strong demand in Algeria.

Are you a part of the current discussions on that matter?

We are about to join the discussions about the future national plan for cardiology. It is a crucial matter for the Algerian patient, heart diseases being the first cause of mortality here.

Regarding the anti-cancer plan, we played our part and are responsible for providing the equipment to three of the new anticancer centres in the country. For instance, the Tlemcen centre is now equipped; we are also working currently on the Sidi Bel Abbès Hospital as well as the

Hospital in Bechar. We are equally present in military hospitals and private institutions. The strategy of Philips in Algeria and in Africa is to bring to the market every new state-of-the-art technology they offer worldwide. Algeria deserves the best technologies, as do other countries like France or the US. Especially because the number of cancer patients in Algeria increases each year, we engaged heavily into the fight. For example, PET-scans are now available to Algerians, while before they had to go to Tunisia or Morocco.

It is not done yet! With 42 million Algerians today, there are still 48 to 50 thousand new cancers each year throughout 2.5 million square kilometres. The private sector must continue to invest time, efforts and money.

Recently, we also released a new revolutionary MRI, called Ingenia Ambition, that takes only 7 litres of helium instead of the usual 1.000 litres, a great advance in technology. It will be available in Algeria, starting in 2019.

How do you assess the challenges associated with bringing innovation to Algeria?

All our technologies are already approved by the authorities around the world. The new MRI has been released in 2018, and we already planned and prepared for it to be released in Algeria very soon.

If we take the case of our 7-liter MRI, the services attached to it and their costs become necessarily lighter than on a 1,000-litre machine, at least with regards to helium and maintenance expenditure. Also, the flow and rapidity of image acquisition are much better, which allows for an increase in the number of patients treated every day, as compared to a similar MRI offered by a competitor. Our equipment provides short, medium- and long-term advantages. This is the very meaning of Aktouf’s work: to bring useful and necessary innovation to the country, while at the same time ensuring economic viability.

This is where professional training becomes key: the final users of our equipment need to be trained accordingly. This is where Philips’ and Aktouf’s partnership is particularly efficient: together with Philips communication and our knowledge of the Algerian ways, we bring an important added value to the Algerian health professionals.

Philips is known for its close relationships with all key stakeholders, both private and public. Do you have local projects and targeted partnerships in that regard?

Absolutely! When we release a new technology, we create new projects and programs to inform and train everyone. They share with us their experience, and we have close relationships with radiologists, doctors and even managers and hospital engineers. They need to operate their equipment at full potential and handle level 1 interventions. More autonomy also means more rentability.

Algeria is the 10th biggest territory in the world. Philips offers a range of digital products that virtually shorten the geographical distances. Are you exploring that possibility with the authorities?

This is indeed an important project for the government, to connect the hospitals and address the lack of specialists in radiology. Public hospitals, and perhaps even private structures, will be connected to address that issue but also to develop diagnoses comparison. Many University Hospitals in the north have conventions with hospitals in the south, but also with hospitals in France (Lille, Strasbourg, Marseille…). This is called twinning, and it is a major added value to the patients, as their doctors can confront their reading of medical tests and they can share the experience. We are fully involved in that effort, we want to develop this quickly. Data archiving and connection will be inevitable in that effort to digitize our Health system.

What is your focus for the next 3 to 5 years?

We need to increase our market share and our coverage of the territory through our Philips certified engineers. We aim for continued Philips training and certification as well as continue to raise our impact across the entire national territory.

The first step towards that goal is already achieved, as we decentralized our operations and now have 4 Aktouf technical centres in all 4 directions: north, south, east and west. Our engineers will be detached to each of them, to provide our clients with the rapid reaction when they need us.

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