Moncef Meklati – General Manager North West Africa, Merck, Algeria

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Moncef Meklati, Merck's general manager for North West Africa, discusses the company's ambitions in the region, the key to successful joint ventures and evolving attitudes to chronic diseases in Algeria.

As the newly appointed General Manager North West Africa for Merck, could you introduce yourself and explain Merck's position in the region as well as your ambitions for the Algerian affiliate moving forward?

I am a gastroenterologist with over 12 years of international experience in the pharmaceutical industry, both in Algeria and in Dubai before finally joining Merck 3 years ago. From the first day I started working for Merck, I've been impressed by the strong commitment of my team to make a positive difference to patients' lives every day. To give you a bit of background, Merck is a vibrant science and technology company, founded 350 years ago. We believe that scientific exploration and responsible entrepreneurship are key to technological advances that benefit us all. This is how Merck has thrived since 1668. Our constant curiosity and specialist approach drive our partnerships and bring new ideas to life. From advancing gene editing technologies and discovering unique ways to treat the most challenging diseases to enabling the intelligence of devices – Merck is basically everywhere. Our global headquarters are in Darmstadt, Germany and our regional hub for

the North West African operations has been based in Tunis for 10 years now. We have several offices in our region, including Algeria, which, with a team of around 55 employees, makes it one of our biggest teams in the region.

Our regional office provides extensive support in terms of marketing, medical, finance and many other areas. At the same time, we want to strengthen our presence at a local level. Estimated at 3.5 billion euros, Algeria is the second biggest market in Africa, after South Africa, and the biggest market in North Africa. We focus on 4 key therapeutic areas. Historically, our expertise in CardioMetabolic Care, which includes diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and thyroid disorders, dates back to 1894. It has been our main objective to bring affordable, high-quality medicines to patients worldwide. Our treatment for type 2 diabetes, for example, has been available in Algeria for decades. Secondly, we are leaders in fertility treatments, offering patients a complete and clinically proven portfolio of fertility treatments at every stage of the reproductive cycle. By bringing new innovative solutions to market, we ultimately aim for better outcomes in clinics, in laboratories and for patients facing infertility. In this way, we want to help couples to realize their dream of having a baby.

Then, with over 20 years of experience in Multiple Sclerosis (MS) care, we remain committed to finding solutions for patients’ significant unmet medical needs and are dedicated to developing options aimed at lessening treatment burden, improving adherence and making administration more convenient to patients. We’re growing our robust Neurology & Immunology pipeline with a range of new therapies that have the potential to alter treatment paradigms for a variety of conditions.

And finally, we are a global oncology innovator that is shaping cancer care for people today and tomorrow. Through strategic collaborations, we want to accelerate innovation in oncology that complement our own expertise, and which might have the potential to transform cancer care.

My vision for the Algerian market is to reinforce our presence here. We have invested in manufacturing plants, therefore one of our treatments is already being produced here. Our key focus is now to meet even higher standards and extend our portfolio to other therapeutic areas.

Your joint venture with Novapharm started right when you joined the company in 2015. You have been a frontrunner in terms of local investment and partnerships. How has that turned out so far?

It has been a rich and fruitful experience; our capacities are now more than sufficient to meet the market demand with regards to our type 2 diabetes treatment. We are currently considering fulfilling potential capacities with other products and are assessing the possibilities available to us which will reinforce our portfolio, optimize our investment at the local level and best serve the interests of the Algerian patient.

What are the key factors to being successful in a partnership, especially in emerging economies?

To my mind, success will depend on 3 pillars. The first one is the willingness of the company to support such a project. If you are committed to what you're aiming to achieve, you should be prepared to address all potential roadblocks in an open and transparent way, while having a solution minded attitude. Secondly, finding the right partner is crucial. It is a win-win situation if everyone is on the same page and aligned with regards to the objectives. Otherwise, the project will most certainly fail. The last pillar would be the much-needed support of the authorities. In Algeria, the State is currently heavily involved in raising the potential of the country as to position Algeria as a hub, not only in and for the Maghreb region, but for the whole continent. We are also considering the opportunity for our partner to export to sub-Saharan countries. Right now, we are focusing on analyzing the specificities of each country in terms of legislation and market trends, to ensure a smooth approval process for our products by local authorities.

The Algerian government continues to see healthcare and pharma as a priority, despite economic difficulties. In your opinion, what are the specific areas to target in priority in order to ensure good patient outcomes, especially when it comes to chronic diseases?

Algeria is quite unique with its healthcare system, showing a well-established universal coverage with free access to patient care. The government is willing to develop self-sufficiency, and by doing so, will dramatically decrease the costs of importation in order to continuously improve access to pharmaceutical products.

It appears to me that one of the government's main priorities is cancer care. The cancer plan relies on several pillars, one of them focusing on awareness, communication and prevention. Then comes treatment, and finally customization of treatments for each patient. Innovative medicine is also a key topic, as these treatments are often very costly. The new Health Bill will help find a win-win

solution to strengthen the partnership between the private and public actors. We need to think of risk sharing for instance, in order to make sure that there is real added value for the patients and an improvement of treatment.

How do you assess your collaboration with the government authorities?

We are closely collaborating with the authorities on a variety of matters. Some discussions are about R&D, some others are focused on clinical trials and access to new medications. In general, every exchange aims to find an optimized way to further improve the healthcare situation in the country together.

We also have a great deal of international experience when it comes to risk-sharing agreements. We can surely share this expertise while adapting it to the Algerian context. Algerian patients are suffering from diseases that characterize developed countries. When it comes to diabetes, hypertension and endocrinology, Merck is continuously raising awareness through various activities during which the importance of early detection and early treatment for patients is emphasized to avoid more serious complications at a later stage. Many of these efforts are supported by the authorities and the medication is usually reimbursed by Social Security. The government has made significant efforts to make these treatments affordable for patients, and therefore strongly encouraged the industry to settle and grow locally.

You are starting a new adventure. What do you hope Merck Algeria will look like in 3 to 4 years?

I am proud to state that our manufacturing plant in Algeria already meets the very same standards as in Europe and as said, we’re currently assessing whether we can possibly expand our product portfolio. Subsequently, we are also very proud of the added-value brought by our large portfolio of fertility treatments. For many couples who have difficulties starting a family, this journey can be a very stressful one as society is usually quick to judge. So, we are proud to have helped many women and couples to achieve their dream of having a baby.

Having said that, I am convinced that innovation is key and for us, science is at the heart of everything we do. This is what drives the discoveries we make and the technologies we create. Many years ago, we brought treatment for multiple sclerosis to the market, and, we are hopeful that we can bring new unique therapies to Algerian patients.

What do you think about Algeria being a great training ground for pharma executives?

Algeria carries great potential, to understand the environment in which you operate and how to address expectations in terms of pricing, registration, distribution channels and other areas helps a lot when one gets to work in other countries. There are a lot of similarities between Algeria and the rest of Maghreb, but also with the Middle-East, without forgetting Europe. This is what enables our managers to understand their markets very well, and it is a very good way to train one's eye to recognize opportunities, and not be blinded by the risks.

One of your roles as GM is to motivate your team, especially in a company as vibrant as Merck. How do you manage to do so?

The key word is empowerment. Accountability and empowerment are the two inseparable elements that make the difference, and I personally believe that it can unleash the true potential of a good & strong team. Everybody grows when they make mistakes. As long as we are trying our best, learn from our mistakes and do better next time, we will make it happen. True collaboration and success happen through empowerment and mutual commitment.

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