Rahja Daher – Head of the Health Group, Swiss Business Council (SBC) Dubai & Northern Emirates, UAE



Dubai is by far still the hub for the pharmaceutical industry within MEA, and I believe this will continue for many years to come

04.12.2019

Tags: UAE, SBC, Healthcare, Association

Rahja Daher, head of the Health Group for the Swiss Business Council (SBC) Dubai & Northern Emirates discusses the association's formation, priorities and major challenges, as well as an outline of the healthcare and life sciences sector in the UAE at large.

As head of Health Group for the SBC, please outline your key priorities.

I was initially recruited as a consultant to assess and execute a health project that the SBC was planning to conduct in Dubai. Having more than 25 years' experience in the pharmaceutical field, it was obvious that unless we had a local strong health governmental entity as a partner in this project, it will not be a success.

Hence, our main challenge was to convince the Dubai Health Authority (DHA), being the lead in Dubai, to be part of this project. From their perspective, there was no clear reason as to why a business council would be interested in doing a health project; therefore, it was an uphill battle from the start. It would not matter if we invited the best scientific speakers from around the globe as if it did not truly connect with the local community the project would likely have been a failure. I knew from the outset, the only way to ensure a high probability of success was to collaborate with DHA.

In executing this project, we faced a few more challenges, mainly financial. As SBC is an NGO and DHA had not been involved in similar events for geriatric diseases before, no budget had been allocated for such a venture. Ultimately, we financed the project ourselves through various, mainly Swiss, organisations including the Swiss Business Hub – Switzerland Global Enterprises and Novartis.

The success of this project helped us gain the trust of the DHA and we eventually succeeded in signing an MOU where SBC acts as a bridge between DHA and the best scientific experts in Switzerland to develop geriatric awareness and management projects. Based on this, they found a need for the health group which is when I was nominated to become the head of the Health Group for the SBC Dubai & Northern Emirates.

What would you highlight as some of the most significant achievements the health group has accomplished since its establishment?

One of our greatest achievements was the “MENA Geriatric Summit”. Another great achievement was when Switzerland was invited to be the only guest country at the Dubai Health Forum in 2018, this was significant for us as it was not only our first time, but other countries that attended were participants but not guests.

Last but not least, we brought in Prof. Jean Pierre Michel with his extensive experience in geriatric health as our scientific expert for our project and the Scientific President for the MENA Geriatric Summit.

Prof. Michel is a professor of medicine and former head of the academic geriatric department (Geneva Hospitals and Medical University). He is also an honorary professor of Medicine at Limoges University (F) and Beijing University Hospital (CN) as well as an adjunct professor at Mac Gill University (Montreal – Ca). He co-founded the European Academy for Medicine of Aging (EAMA) in 1994, the Middle East Academy of Medicine of Ageing (MEAMA), in 2002, the *Academia Latinoamericana de Medicina del Adult major* (ALMA), in 2008 and the Asian Academy for Medicine of Ageing (AAMA) in 2015. He was also appointed as ambassador of the IAGG (International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics) for Asia and the Middle East in 2011.

The UAE government has put a special priority on healthcare – with more than USD one billion invested in the sector in 2019 alone. Can you provide an overview of the health

sector in the UAE?

As the SBC, we have limited access to statistics, certain health figures related and so on, hence we are not in a position to compare, we believe the most reliable sources to have these data are the Healthcare Authorities such as DHA, Health Authority – Abu Dhabi (HAAD), and the Ministry of Health (MOH).

As we are based in Dubai, we deal primarily with the DHA rather than HAAD, however, the highest priority for both is to improve patient service, satisfaction and happiness. For instance, “the DHA’s ambition is to adopt new technologies such as telehealth as one of the most effective tools that can make primary care consultations available at the fingerprints of the patients”, and “the DHA’s ‘A Doctor for Every Citizen’ initiative is aimed to guarantee the happiness and satisfaction of the citizens, in-line with achieving Dubai’s vision to become healthier and happier society”.

Does the industry collaborate with organizations such as the SBC for certain initiatives, and what do you expect of the pharmaceutical companies for multi-stakeholder collaboration?

Pharmaceutical companies are involved with various initiatives and events that they support. As a Business Council, we have limited support from pharmaceutical companies for our Health projects. However, we are aware that we need to make more efforts in promoting what a business council can add to pharma company’s business interests. That being said we are making changes and are now more involved especially with the support from our partner in this project ‘DHA’.

We are confident that our new projects beyond The Geriatric Summit – educational program, will motivate more pharmaceutical companies to contribute not only to the Swiss companies but also other related pharmaceutical companies as well.

What role should UAE’s pharmaceutical sector play within the GCC region?

I see Dubai as the centre for healthcare rather than the UAE in general. However, HAAD is also involved in many areas. I travel a great deal throughout the GCC and there is a large budget for healthcare and pharmaceuticals across the region. That being said, Dubai is by far still the hub for the pharmaceutical industry within MEA, and I believe this will continue for many years to come.

The UAE is positioning itself as a place where innovation can thrive in many sectors, including healthcare. Is there a place for increased manufacturing in the region from a multinational perspective and what needs to be done to foster more local production in the country?

From a local perspective, much has progressed in the pharmaceutical manufacturing sector over the last five to seven years. Firstly, there has been a big push towards the production locally mainly in generics. There are many projects underway where local manufacturing companies are teaming up with international pharmaceutical companies and branded generics to provide local and regional suppliers.

Julphar Gulf Pharmaceuticals is an example of a leading local manufacturer that has been successful in the UAE and the Gulf region with its branded generic products. On an international scale, Dubai based Global Pharma, joined Sanofi in a partnership to produce some of its generic medicines in the UAE. Abu Dhabi based Neopharma entered a deal with Pfizer’s Wyeth to produce locally some of their pain management, cardiovascular diseases and women’s health. Furthermore, the number of pharmaceutical manufacturing plants in the UAE is expected to increase more than double in the next few years as part of economic diversification efforts as said by an official.

What are some of the key initiatives you would like to highlight and also some strategic priorities of the health group in enabling businesses to thrive in the UAE?

Awareness is the key to any health aspects and in the UAE, there is room for every sector to experience rapid growth and expansion. In terms of our strategic priorities, Switzerland is considered one of the leading innovators worldwide and we would like to maintain our excellent image in the UAE. Finally, for the health group, as aforementioned we are looking to increase our focus on health innovation and related business.

See more interviews