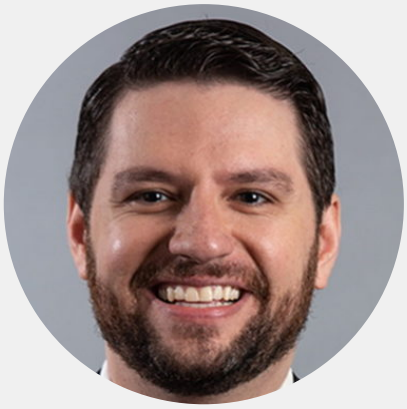
Rodrigo Rodriguez – General Manager, Middle East Cluster, Takeda



Looking at Vision 2030, it is evident that the country's healthcare system is shifting to quality-based care which means that there will be improvements in efficiency, quality, and infrastructure. Access to innovation will play an important role in the transformation of the country

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Rodrigo Rodriguez, general manager for Takeda's Middle East cluster, discusses the company's ambitions in the collective Saudi pharma market, which is expected to reach a size of USD 10 billion by 2025, the need for tailor-made programs for different countries in the Middle East, and how clinical trials and registry initiatives can help improve diagnosis timelines for rare disease patients. In addition, the Brazilian executive comments on the changes in Saudi's procurement system, going beyond the Saudization of commercial roles, and improving the use of health data collection.

As this is your first assignment outside of your home country of Brazil, what are your first impressions of the region and how advanced is the integration of Shire there?

I am fortunate to work for an organization with a global footprint and which fosters talent. This has allowed me to obtain career and life opportunities abroad. I have been with Takeda for 18 years, since 2003, and after growing the Brazilian affiliate in various roles, I was transferred to the Middle East in March 2020. It was a challenging start because the first confirmed COVID-19 case in Dubai was announced only 15 days after my arrival; then came the lockdowns and the overall management of the crisis. Nevertheless, I feel privileged to have had this challenge during my first international general manager role. I am lucky to work in an industry and for a company with the

ability to change the course of a pandemic.

The Middle East region represents high calibre talent across government entities, distributors, and healthcare professionals. I have been impressed by the fact that most countries in the region have clear long-term plans to improve their economies, societies, and healthcare systems; they have a comprehensive agenda, clear KPIs and pathways to increase the quality of their healthcare system and business environments.

Regarding Takeda, two years after the Shire acquisition we have concluded the integration at the global, regional and countries level and are now operating as one company. The company is driven by what we call ‘Takeda-ism,’ a set of values that revolve around integrity. Whenever we approach an important decision, we ask if it will help patients, reinforce our reputation, and build trust with society, developing a sustainable business.

The Takeda Middle East organization has experienced several changes in leadership position in recent years. How challenging has that been in terms of stakeholder management considering the importance of establishing solid relationships?

My role provides me with a platform to learn from diverse healthcare systems, helping me absorb strong knowledge and grow and at the same time transfer knowledge within the organization. Consequently, the changes in leadership have been perhaps unexpected but, in all cases, have been because the people in question were promoted.

One of our current priorities is taking the opportunity to establish partnerships with different stakeholders besides partnering with regional governments and healthcare providers. Forging partnerships will be crucial if we are to deliver solid outcomes.

How is the Middle East regional cluster structured in terms of markets, priorities, similarities, and divergencies?

I oversee Takeda’s Middle East operations which includes 15 countries in total that have a combined population of over 500 million people. Takeda celebrates its 240th anniversary as a company this year and its 25th anniversary in the region. We have a long heritage in the Middle East and the company is in good shape here.

Takeda has a wide range of innovative products in the fields of oncology, gastroenterology, rare diseases, haematology, and plasma-derived therapy. The products address important patient needs and on top of their positive impact on patients, play an important role for healthcare professionals, government, payers, and other stakeholders.

We have a unique research and development (R&D) system that will continue to provide many first-in-class and best-in-class medicines in the aforementioned areas as well as in neuroscience.

Also, with the acquisition of Shire, we were able to access a solid rare disease portfolio that complements Takeda’s offering. Today, our overall portfolio is focused on complex and rare conditions.

You lead a region that includes both countries with a very high income per capita and advanced healthcare systems and others that are still in earlier stages of development. How is Takeda working to ensure that no country is left behind?

One of the key elements that Takeda must consider is the ability to deliver therapies to patients across the world, not only discover them. While we do find robust healthcare systems in some countries, we understand that there are other places where we must implement different programs that adapt to specific needs.

We have many patient-assistance programs in place that accelerate access to much-needed innovation. At the end of the day, the mission is to discover innovation and provide it to patients in need; that view requires us to create tailor-made programs that, for example, have a pricing model that varies in accordance with a country’s capacity to pay.

Is there a certain level of solidarity from wealthier countries in recognition of those differences when discussing different pricing models?

That is a continuous conversation because we are trying to find a good balance between investments in innovation and the overall sustainability of the healthcare system, including the public and private healthcare budgets. Today, the level of understanding is much higher than in years past. We have a clear process to ensure that these innovative access programs are becoming a reality with a clear understanding from both sides.

Saudi Arabia is certainly the most robust market in your current country portfolio. How would you describe the main market characteristics after more than a year in your position?

Saudi Arabia is the largest pharmaceutical market in the region, driven by population growth, changing demographics, and impressive advancements in the healthcare system. According to IQVIA, the total Saudi pharma market is expected to reach a size of USD 10 billion in 2025, representing approximately half of total revenues in the region.

Looking at Vision 2030, it is evident that the country's healthcare system is shifting to quality-based care which means that there will be improvements in efficiency, quality, and infrastructure. Access to innovation will play an important role in the transformation of the country.

From Takeda's perspective, Saudi Arabia is already the main market in the region. We set a highly ambitious plan to outpace market growth that will be achieved because of our current therapies as well as those we are set to introduce in the coming years. We expect to introduce at least five products in the coming years and we believe that they will have a significant impact on the overall quality of healthcare in the country.

Takeda has offices in Riyadh and Jeddah and has been recognized as one of the country's top employers thanks to our focus on flexibility, inclusion, development, and wellness. In alignment with Vision 2030, Saudization has been a key priority for Takeda and I am proud to say that we are way beyond the minimum requirements. Last year, we invested more than 2,000 hours in training programs and doubled the number of female employees in the organization.

Saudization has strict requirements for pharma companies' salesforces, but do you think it worth going beyond that to include positions in other, critical, roles such as medical affairs and market access?

Today, we have Saudi nationals in a variety of positions beyond commercial roles with local staff in the medical, market access, and human resources teams. The priority in that regard is retaining the talent we already have by providing more training and growth opportunities. In our case, we have many upcoming launches and a solid business base that will allow us to expand, but that requires having the right talent in the right positions with the right sets of capabilities.

How is Takeda approaching the fierce battle for talent that must be brewing between other Big Pharma players given the fact that most are expecting also to grow their operations in KSA?

The Saudis are doing a great job in terms of talent development, and we are finding many candidates with good skillsets and backgrounds. For us, internal development is the only way to fostering talents and ensure we are ready for a key transformation. To address the dynamics of the Saudi market, we must remain an attractive company, and I believe that our ambitious plans will help us do just that.

Mobility is also a big upside for the people that join our organization. Saudi Arabia is producing high-quality talent that in a few years will take up important roles at a regional and global level.

The Vision 2030 agenda includes the ambition of attracting more scientific know-how through clinical trials. Do you see the country as a hotspot for clinical trials in the region?

Saudi Arabia clearly welcomes innovation in the pharmaceutical sector, and it is important to recognize the country’s rapid progress in this area. They have reviewed key regulations to create fast-track pathways for innovative products, as well as harmonized requirements in line with international health authorities. Today, a clear pathway exists for the analysis and approval of new products.

Regarding clinical trials, Takeda conducts several local, regional, and global initiatives in Saudi Arabia that involve close to 800 patients. We expect those local data-generating initiatives to continue in the upcoming years. For that, more partnerships with the government and other players will be necessary; their input will allow us to have a better understanding of local epidemiological data and treatment patterns to find potential gaps where Takeda can play an important role.

In your experience, how challenging is it to find the patients cohorts for those clinical trials in Saudi? What role data can play in that journey also for the government to understand their population needs?

It is not easy because rare diseases are hard to diagnose. Patients spend an average of three to six years before finding a proper diagnosis and treatment, this delay has a direct impact on their quality of life and the overall healthcare system. We believe that clinical trials and registry initiatives can play an important role in addressing this challenge, providing robust data about the epidemiological situation, and of course, patterns of treatment.

When we talk about patient data collection, we must think about the confidential nature of the data. The system must ensure that data is used properly in accordance with international standards. Today, Saudi Arabia does not allow patient data to be stored in servers outside of the country. I do see that those partnerships can be useful because data can be leveraged not only by companies but also the authorities to develop better local policies and redirect resources to areas that need it most.

The Saudi government has reinforced its medicine procurement system by empowering NUPCO to take an expanded role in medicine tendering. What do you perceive as the advantages and disadvantages of this?

NUPCO is a great example of the advancements of the Saudi healthcare system. The processes and timelines that it has set are clear, which gives companies a better perspective on the steps required to provide access to their portfolio. NUPCO is a key initiative in the country’s quest to accelerate access to innovative products.

Evidently, whenever we talk about a procurement system, there will be discussions about the best pricing policy, but Takeda believes that it can make offers that reflect the product’s benefit to society. This is an open discussion, and we need to supply real-world evidence that demonstrates the true value of our products. Long-term sustainability should always be considered.

In a nutshell, what are the Saudi affiliate’s priorities moving forward?

We have a very strong team in place in Saudi Arabia. Takeda has grown significantly in the last three years, more than doubling the size of its business there. Going forward, we have opportunities in three main areas. First, we should accelerate partnerships with various stakeholders. Second, we can improve the generation of local data because while we have already worked with more than 800 patients, we need to aspire to reach more and include Saudi nationals in the initial stages of our research. We must have a clearer understanding of the epidemiological

situation, the bottlenecks and the ways in which Takeda can help patients even further. The third element, which we have already started working on, is related to Patient Support Programs as we move to personalized care. Patients should be considered from a broad perspective, not only in terms of medicines. Treatment should consider the whole recovery journey. This type of program will increasingly become a distinctive element of Saudi Arabia's healthcare system.

Is there a final message you would like to share with the authorities and your peers in the Saudi market?

My message is about opportunities. The transformation in Saudi Arabia is incredible and it has been possible because of the willingness of the country's public sector stakeholders to engage in open dialogue. If the dialogue channels are maintained, we will continue to find common objectives that can provide better health for the population in a sustainable manner. Saudi Arabia's healthcare market and system have the necessary tools to increase the standard of care not only in the Middle East but at a global level.

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