Mona Obaid – Medical Director, Lilly Saudi Arabia

There is a huge opportunity ahead for the pharmaceutical industry in Saudi Arabia and for Saudis

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Dr Mona Obaid, chief medical officer for Lilly in Saudi Arabia, explains how the country's Vision 2030 is shaping the pharma industry and society at large, Lilly's role in increasing awareness of diabetes, and the opportunities for Saudi in regional clinical trials.

Can you briefly outline your medical background and international journey to becoming medical director for Lilly in Saudi Arabia?

I went to medical college at King Saud University in Riyadh before training in internal medicine, in which I was certified by the Saudi Board of Internal Medicine. After that, I moved to Canada with my husband and did another residency in neurology and clinical movement disorders fellowship. Having then returned to Saudi Arabia after my time in Canada, I found myself eager to learn more and thus moved to France to train in advanced therapeutics in movement disorders.

After finishing that training, I began working as a consultant for neurology and movement disorder in King Fahad Medical City in Riyadh which is a tertiary Ministry of Health hospital.

I joined Lilly Saudi Arabia in November 2020, becoming the first Saudi woman to hold a top leadership position in the Kingdom's multinational pharmaceutical sector.

Personally, I really value patient care and see this as a continuation of my professional journey. When you have practiced disease management and patient management in a clinical setting, you

better understand that it is not only physicians who take care of patients, but that there is a continuum of care across an integrated system of stakeholders. Patients need the help of physicians, pharmaceutical companies, manufacturers, and logistics experts.

In my recent move to Lilly, I do not see myself transitioning away from patient care; I see it as taking a different approach that allowed me to share my experience as a healthcare practitioner. The aim remains the same: patient care and safety.

Had you had previous interactions with Lilly before joining the company? What was your perspective of the organization?

Lilly has existed for the last 145 years and is a well-known company, especially in its breakthroughs through insulin and polio vaccines. Since then, the firm has invested a lot in developing and manufacturing medicines that are conducive to better patient outcomes and the opportunity to work for such a renowned international organization was a good opportunity. Although the corporate world is new to me, I am here to learn and have received immense support from my colleagues and the organization at large.

I joined Lilly in the middle of the pandemic and was onboarded virtually. I was amazed by how seamless the process was. There were not many difficulties, we just had to get accustomed to a new reality; all of the information was digitalized, and I found it relatively easy to communicate with physicians, who displayed a high degree of flexibility. It was amazing to observe how Lilly ran the business and engaged with the medical communication virtually.

Can you explain what your position entails in Saudi Arabia and the role it plays for Lilly's strategic objectives?

I am the Medical Director for Lilly in Saudi Arabia. As medical director, I lead a team of talented people that take care of the company's scientific operations here.

Our priority is to continue being a reliable source of medical information to support healthcare professionals. A big part of what we do as Lilly's medical team is support sharing the medical knowledge and the science behind our medications, as well as accelerating the availability of life-saving medications. Regarding the country's health industry, we are also aiming to develop capabilities and infrastructure to help further develop the healthcare system locally.

What is your perception of Vision 2030, how it is shaping the pharma industry in the country, and what it means for the local population?

As part of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, companies are driving diversity and inclusion, hiring more Saudi talent. The local Lilly organization is made up of 80 percent Saudi nationals, with gender parity and almost 75 percent millennials. The interesting part of Saudi Arabia is the talents for medical functions, companies just need to identify it and drive awareness about career opportunities within the pharma industry.

In my personal experience, the emphasis on female empowerment is something that has provided us with optimism.

Women have been part of the workforce for decades, in education, for example, but Vision 2030 made it the norm rather than the exception. The new normal is to find women in the workplace, we are perceived as equal when applying for a job. In Lilly, women and men are both performing at a strong level, setting the bar very high.

What are the specific things you would like to achieve with Lilly, either because they are the company's goals, or you consider them important?

One of Lilly's main goals is developing local talent; an ambition I share personally. We want to discover and develop people to prepare them and provide fantastic future opportunities.

Another goal is making significant advancements in awareness and education, helping raise awareness about the different ways in which the pharma industry can create value. Moreover, we want to expand our local footprint in Saudi Arabia by helping more patients who need our medicines.

How confident are you that Saudi Arabia can accomplish its goal of playing an important role in clinical trials?

As a clinician, I believe that our country can play a prominent role in clinical trials across the region. Saudi Arabia has the capabilities, expertise, and local data, which is crucial because it allows companies to put in place more ambitious projects.

Lilly is closely collaborating with the Saudi Arabia Ministry of Investment (MISA) on *the Clinical Trials Coalition* project to help advance the role of pharmaceuticals in the country *and further elevate the Kingdom's R&D ecosystem*, and we already have Phase IV clinical trials in the country. The government is welcoming clinical trials, and companies are willing to invest in them.

Is there a final message you would like to share with our international audience about Lilly and Saudi Arabia?

I think there is a huge opportunity ahead for the pharmaceutical industry in Saudi Arabia and for Saudis, as a Saudi citizen, I can say that the country supported my education because it cares about individuals.

Lilly is committed to Vision 2030 because it can play a major role in achieving the national objectives. Healthcare is important for everyone, not only companies or doctors, and our role as professionals is to make sure that quality healthcare is available to all.

Finally, I encourage everyone to visit Saudi Arabia and see the country for themselves.

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