Melvin D’Souza – CVP & General Manager, Novo Nordisk KSA



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Melvin D'Souza outlines the strategy that Novo Nordisk Saudi Arabia – the country’s market leader in diabetes care, obesity, hemophilia, and growth hormone treatment – is following and analyzes the potential impact of local content enhancement for the Kingdom’s Vision 2030 healthcare transformation plans.

The last time you were interviewed by PharmaBoardroom, back in 2012, you were heading Novo Nordisk’s operations in India. Now that you are in Saudi Arabia, how do you see the big changes in Saudi Arabia and the impact of the Kingdom’s Vision 2030?

Saudi Arabia is going through a huge economic transformation. The Kingdom’s Vision 2030 transformation plan is already influencing some of the forward-looking plans in the governmental agencies. The healthcare segment is one of the priority segments getting impacted through these changes.

The government is firmly committed and has invested in making Vision 2030 a reality. There is a strong and stable environment which is investing in advanced infrastructure and efficient systems. The blueprint for the transformation is clear and is headed in the right direction to achieve it.

What is the reality on the ground for pharma companies in terms of adapting to the transformation of the Saudi market?

The pharma market has been one of the consistent contributors to the economic growth in Saudi Arabia. Though the pharma segment has been impacted significantly due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it will rebound in the coming years, with a projected growth in the range of 4-5%. However, one of the fundamental challenges on the ground is to adapt and cope with the changes to the healthcare framework and the localization plans announced by the government. It is for businesses to establish a sustainable footprint that results in a successful long-term outlook.

If we fast forward 5-7 years from now the healthcare segment will be much more vibrant with active Public-Private partnerships and the possibility to invest more deeply in the economy. This change will help bring innovation faster to the market, upgrading technology and possibilities to open the job market. Overall, these changes will support robust growth and positively impact the overall healthcare system.

Within that dynamic environment, how has Novo Nordisk managed to compete and adapt to the country's priorities outlined in Vision 2030?

Novo Nordisk is the 4^{th} largest multinational pharma company in Saudi Arabia with a size of approximately 360 million USD, and one of the fastest-growing companies with an average CAGR of 15 percent for the last three years.

We have leading positions in diabetes, obesity, haemophilia, growth disorder segments reaching out to approximately ~600,000 patients with our products and services. Our team works closely with various stakeholders creating awareness, building capacity and ensuring that our innovative treatment options are available to a large number of people.

We have been successful in bringing in innovations early to the Saudi Arabian market by investing in R&D, creating good platforms for education, leveraging our strong portfolio and committing to a good localization strategy. For us 'Go-Local' means having an organization that is fit for the future in the country, empowering women in the organization and attaining a strong footprint of our products.

We have been successful, with a strong local representation of ~57%, a diverse workforce with ~30% being women and a strong commitment to having launched one big global innovation simultaneously in the market for the last 5 years.

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Novo Nordisk Saudi Arabia will continue to innovate, adapt and evolve in the coming days. Our purpose is to solve some of the pressing needs of the patients by bringing innovations into their hands early and having an empowered team and an organisational setup to contribute to Vision 2030 realization and growth of the segment.

With such a high market share in many segments, are you concerned that the strategy from now on could become defensive in the face of increased competition?

Our market position reflects our ambition to bring innovation early and commitment to service a wide range of patients with one of the broadest portfolio of products. This also puts us in a place to be a responsible player driven by ensuring sustainable outcomes for the patients.

How would you compare Novo Nordisk’s approach in the diabetes and obesity markets?

Over the last 100 years, Novo Nordisk has shown tremendous commitment in diabetes care through its research and innovation. Today, the innovation and experience within protein science has opened up new possibilities for the treatment of chronic diseases, especially within diabetes and obesity.

Globally, we have been working closely with leading organisations and thought leaders across markets, including Saudi Arabia, to get a better understanding of the diverse conditions, patient profiles and build capacity to understand and treat these diseases. We have several ongoing projects engaging healthcare professionals in training programs, a robust clinical trial plan and outreach programs creating awareness in the public.

One of the MoH’s most interesting KPIs for Vision 2030 is improving life expectancy by 4-5 years. How much will depend on the management of chronic diseases such as diabetes, considering that the patient population is between 4-5 million?

Saudi Arabia is among the top five in the Middle East countries with high diabetes prevalence of 18.3 percent (IDF 2019) and close to 30 percent are obese and/or overweight, according to IDF and World Obesity respectively. Unfortunately, these statistics show a very alarming trend in a younger population, which will further impact their work life, lifestyle and hence, the economy if they were not diagnosed, nor treated at an early stage.

This is where we, as partners, can make a difference by building capacity for trainings and a better understanding of such diseases. Consequently, establishing sustainable partnerships with healthcare stakeholders like the Ministry of Health (MoH), The Saudi Society of Endocrinology and Metabolism (SSEM), Saudi Scientific Diabetes Society (SSDS), etc., is essential to create a better understanding of the ecosystem, address the disease state and help in bending the curve of these chronic diseases.

However, reaching out to millions of people afflicted with a chronic disease is a daunting task. For example, in diabetes, every outreach measure ultimately impacts approximately 6% of the people to live a life free from complications. So, raising awareness, building capacity and offering better treatment options is an ongoing effort that requires strong collaborative approaches, public and private participation and a sustainable plan for the long term.

How advanced is the discussion in Saudi Arabia about obesity as a disease as opposed to a lifestyle problem?

Obesity, like diabetes, is an emergency in slow motion! Governments, in general, understand that obesity management is important and must be addressed as part of a national program. The biggest challenge for obesity is in its financial burden, but we see a willingness to change and act soon.

In Saudi Arabia, for example, while bariatric surgery is covered, there is clearly a need for early intervention to manage the disease progression. Bridging these gaps by building awareness and creating the right capacity to treat the disease is something we are committed to working closely with our partners.

Novo Nordisk is currently playing a big role in Saudi Arabia in its fight against obesity and diabetes, but what does the country mean to the company?

Saudi Arabia is a very important focal point for Novo Nordisk obesity and diabetes management plans, globally. All our efforts on creating awareness, education platforms and capacity building have got keen attention and resources.

Upstream, we have started actively investing in early clinical trial programs in the space of diabetes, obesity and also haemophilia. Downstream, we have partnered with various stakeholders to create awareness and help support education. Our ambition is to get a deeper understanding of the rising and alarming number of patients, support robust capacity building programs and bring world-class innovations early to Saudi Arabia.

Ultimately, when we work together, patients Win.

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