**Inside View**

Abdelali Haoudi, Head of Research Strategy and Business Development at the King Abdullah International Medical Research Center, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

The King Abdullah International Medical Research Center (KAIMRC) opened its research building at the end of 2015. It currently accommodates about 50 investigators and plans to more than triple their number over the next five years. It aims to set up collaborations with many of the best medical research institutions in Europe and North America.

KAIMRC is located inside what Riyadh locals refer to as ‘medical city’: a large campus with a general hospital, a children’s hospital and a cardiac hospital; and a health sciences university. King Saud Bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences, comprised of seven colleges, specialising in medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, public health and health informatics, applied medical sciences, nursing and science & health professions. Its laboratories draw together researchers that were previously dotted across these institutions. As the centre expands, the intention is to streamline research into key priorities where it hopes to encourage a culture of innovation and have a real impact. Among the key players for this process is Abdelali Haoudi, a man with broad experience in management in the Middle East, and as a researcher, having held appointments at institutions such as Boston Children’s Hospital.

**Q: How would you describe KAIMRC’s strategy?**

With the creation of the new building we took the opportunity to reassess our strategy. We decided to focus on a few select areas under the umbrella topics of cancer, diabetes, infectious diseases, cardiovascular disease, and neurological disease. We didn’t want to try to do everything possible in human health, as had been the temptation before our medical research was rooted in one space.

A key part of our strategy is the medical biotechnology park, which we will be launching soon. We’ve already started two companies that will make up part of it. One of them provides tools and services for research, such as tissue culture medium and agar plates for microbiology. The intention is that all core supplies will be manufactured in-house, so researchers do not have to wait weeks or months for deliveries from abroad. That should make a big difference for our scientists. The second company assesses the efficacy of generic medicine against against commonplace medical treatments. So far there are three more biotech companies in the pipeline, although their development is at an early stage.

We’re keen to position the research centre on the international stage as soon as possible. There are a number of ways we’re trying to do that. We want to engage in extensive collaborations with foreign partners. We push really strongly for our junior scientists to participate in exchange programmes with Oxford, Harvard, Imperial College and other top institutions.

**Q: What is the purpose of the annual research forum?**

Our seventh annual research forum, which was held on 13, 14 and 15 December, was different from the others in the sense that it was not only aimed at scientists, but also at medical policymakers and at potential international partners.

The forum’s theme is how to align the efforts of the research centre with Saudi Arabia’s vision for the year 2030, which emphasizes shifting the national economy towards one based on innovation and knowledge. In this context, we see huge potential for biotechnology development in the country. We are completely committed to supporting the development of inventions.

This year’s forum will see the launch of a new award, open to scientists affiliated to any institution in Saudi Arabia. We want to reward not just medical innovation, but also potential medical impact. That word — impact — is really important to us. It might be clinical research that’s close to publication, or an idea that has great opportunity for commercialization.

**Q: From the perspective of an international researcher, what do you think is most attractive about collaborating with KAIMRC?**

Within the same campus, we have an academic lab and the biotechnology park. So if a collaborator or researcher based here has an idea for a spin-off, he or she can go about making that happen within the same space as they continue their other research projects. We have both the infrastructure and the policies to really support people — and, of course, the funding. Moreover, we can offer those interested in clinical research access to patients through the various hospitals located nearby.

**Q: Of the research that is already up and running, what are you most excited about?**

I’m excited about our genomics projects. I’m especially proud of the progress that we’ve made in stem cells. We have the Saudi Biobank, with its own dedicated building close to the research centre. It’s state of the art and can house up to 200,000 biological samples, such as tissues from patients involved in a clinical trial. Saudi Arabia’s policy for stem-cell research is actually very permissive for all types of stem cells, although obviously there are some regulations around the use of embryonic stem cells. When you look at the current status of the field, though, everyone will tell you that induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs), from adult cells, probably have the most medical applications. So we’re gearing ourselves up to move in that direction, with programmes on iPSCs and mesenchymal stem cells. We also have a cord blood cell bank, which has been accredited by FACT-Netcord, the relevant international body, and has already shared its stem cells with other international centres. They are already being used in transplants. It’s a huge achievement for such a young institution and I’m certainly proud of that.

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Calling for Partnerships in some of our Strategic R&D areas

- STEM CELLS & REGENERATIVE MEDICINE
- DIABETES
- CANCER
- GENETICS & GENOMICS