

Karla Alcazar - SVP & President LatAm, Eli Lilly



We see a bright future ahead and are dedicated to being a transformative force in healthcare for many decades to come

13.01.2025

Tags: [Mexico](#), [LatAm](#), [Lilly](#), [Diabetes](#), [Obesity](#), [Oncology](#), [Strategy](#)

Karla Alcazar, Head of LATAM at Eli Lilly, discusses the company's plans to tackle pressing regional health challenges such as obesity, diabetes, and cancer, while also highlighting the region's critical role in Lilly's global strategy. Alcazar offers insights into the company's focus on innovation, diversity, and patient-centricity, as well as her efforts to empower female talent and drive meaningful change in the LATAM healthcare landscape.

How has your career trajectory led you to this role as the LATAM Head of Lilly?

I have dedicated my entire career to the pharmaceutical industry because of my passion for making a meaningful difference in patient health. My journey began in Mexico, where I aimed to impact local healthcare, but I have since been fortunate to contribute to improving health globally.

I have been with Lilly for 18 years, which is my second pharmaceutical company after starting my career with Bristol-Myers Squibb. I joined Lilly because I was inspired by the opportunity for long-term growth within the company. Seeing others build lasting careers here convinced me it was the right move, and now I have become one of those examples. Over the years, I have held various roles in sales, marketing, and leadership across different regions and countries. I started as a sales representative, later becoming a market research manager, a brand manager, a global brand manager based in the U.S., and then many other regional roles.

Eventually, I was appointed Chief Marketing Officer for the LATAM region before being offered my first general manager position. That role was a significant leap because I started in Brazil, which is unusual as it is typically a later-stage assignment for General Managers. For me, it was a series of firsts—my first General Manager role, my first experience speaking Portuguese, and my first time living in another Latin American country. I was also the first woman to lead the business there. Over five years, we launched five new molecules, grew our people, and transformed the business from a post-patent period into one of growth.

Now, as the President and General Manager of LATAM, I oversee the entire region while directly managing the Mexican business. Once again, I am the first woman in this role. I have been here for two and a half years, and I also serve as Vice President of the industry association in Mexico, which has been a rewarding opportunity to contribute to broader healthcare discussions.

What were your primary mandates when you first assumed this position two years ago?

When I took on this role, my main priority was driving growth through new products. At the time, the business was heavily reliant on mature brands, as they were the largest contributors to sales. However, I believed that our focus needed to shift toward the future. The business was largely stagnant, balancing patent losses without significant growth.

I set a clear goal to deliver double-digit growth. To achieve this, we redirected investments away from mature brands and concentrated on launching and scaling our newer products. Today, we are proud to be one of the few companies in the Mexican market achieving double-digit growth, effectively double the average growth rate of the overall market.

My second focus was talent development. We established an ambitious talent agenda to build and nurture the capabilities within our Mexican business. I am thrilled that we are now starting to see the results, including successfully exporting several team members to corporate roles. This has been a point of pride for our organization and a testament to the strength of our people.

As Lilly aims to become the world's first trillion-dollar life science company, with plans to launch over 20 new drugs in the next decade—an average of two per year in Latin America—how are you preparing for this upcoming period of product launches?

The key to preparing for this ambitious period is mindset. The team must be ready for launch, and we've made significant changes to how we approach this. Previously, we would begin our launch preparations about 12 months before the actual launch. Now, we are starting much earlier to set the groundwork. This is especially important because many of our upcoming launches are for first-in-class or best-in-class drugs, which often require us to create new markets entirely.

Take Alzheimer's as an example. Before we even think about treatment, we need to build an ecosystem that fosters diagnostics and raises awareness about the disease itself. Similarly, for conditions like obesity, we are working to address the stigma and misconceptions surrounding it. Many still view obesity as a lifestyle choice rather than a chronic disease, but it is a condition with serious health consequences. By starting early, we aim to ensure that the healthcare ecosystem—diagnostics, awareness, and key stakeholders—are ready by the time we launch.

What has been your experience in managing the expectations of key stakeholders regarding the benefits of new products, particularly in the Mexican market, which faces significant challenges related to obesity?

There is still a significant opportunity to change how we approach obesity. What makes me optimistic is that in the Mexican market, many leaders in the healthcare space now recognize obesity as a pandemic. With two-thirds of the adult population classified as overweight or obese, this is a crisis affecting not only individuals but also the healthcare system, which bears enormous costs from related conditions like cardiovascular disease and many others.

However, we still face the challenge of shifting the belief that obesity can be resolved solely through prevention, exercise, and dieting. While prevention is critical, it is not a complete solution. Many patients follow diets, exercise diligently, and yet struggle to lose weight because obesity is a chronic disease. It must be treated as such.

At Lilly, we advocate for prevention but also recognize the urgency of addressing obesity as a chronic condition. The stigma surrounding obesity needs to end. Many factors, including genetics and environmental influences, contribute to its prevalence. With two-thirds of Mexico's population already overweight or obese, we need a paradigm shift in how we approach this issue.

With competitors in the market, how does Lilly maintain a competitive edge in this segment?

Lilly's focus is twofold. First, we are committed to developing the most effective treatments. Our research and development efforts are dedicated to ensuring that our medications deliver the best outcomes for patients. Second, we emphasize working closely with key stakeholders to drive meaningful change in the perception and management of obesity.

We are not here to simply promote weight loss or to encourage the misuse of these medications. Our mission is to help patients who are at serious risk of health complications and even death due to obesity. By focusing on the patients who truly need treatment and ensuring ethical practices, we aim to lead the market responsibly and with purpose.

Diabetes is another critical health issue in Mexico and across Latin America. What more can be done to address the diabetes crisis in Mexico and the broader region?

The first step is working closely with healthcare professionals. There is a significant opportunity here because many patients remain undiagnosed. At the same time, even those who are diagnosed and treated are often not achieving proper control of their condition. Lilly can play a key role by educating HCPs, not just about new therapies but also about the importance of treating diabetes early and effectively.

We need to move away from the outdated approach of starting with older treatments and waiting too long to adopt newer, more effective options. Diabetes is a progressive disease, and patients deserve the best care from the outset. Today, only about 10% of treated diabetes patients are actually in control of their condition. This represents a tremendous opportunity to make a meaningful impact on the lives of patients while reducing the immense costs that diabetes imposes on both healthcare systems and individuals paying out of pocket.

Digital tools and devices are really improving the lives of patients, especially in managing diabetes. Where do you feel Latin America stands on that front?

Latin America is making strides in this area. I was reading that there are around 1,200 digital health companies in the region, with the majority based in Brazil, but also a growing presence in Mexico. Globally, health systems are recognizing that digital tools can help address critical challenges like resource limitations.

Telemedicine, monitoring devices, and other digital solutions can alleviate the strain on physical healthcare resources. These tools allow for more efficient management of conditions like diabetes, where timely interventions are crucial. Patients no longer have to wait as long for consultations or routine follow-ups, which is a significant improvement for both the system and the patients. The digital health environment in Latin America is evolving and has the potential to drive greater efficiency and better outcomes.

When it comes to access to innovation and medicine, do you believe Latin America fully recognizes the value of innovation in healthcare?

I believe there is a genuine commitment from governments and key stakeholders to provide the best possible healthcare to their populations. However, significant challenges remain. For instance, in Mexico, only 5.5% of GDP is spent on healthcare, which is far below the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) recommended minimum of 9.2%. While countries like Brazil and Colombia invest a bit more, they are still below that benchmark. This presents a substantial opportunity for improvement.

Another challenge is the delay in making innovative treatments available to patients. It can take four to five years for new therapies to reach those in need. Imagine knowing that a life-saving treatment exists but not being able to access it for years. It is heartbreaking for patients and their families, and this is something that must change.

We also need to shift the focus from solely looking at the cost of innovation to understanding its broader impact. Innovative treatments improve quality of life, reduce hospitalizations, prevent complications, and boost workplace efficiency. These factors drive economic growth and reduce long-term healthcare costs. While there is growing recognition of the importance of health, we must continue to advocate for policies and systems that prioritize health as a fundamental driver of economic and societal progress.

What other key therapeutic areas is Lilly focusing on in the Latin American region?

Lilly's oncology franchise is a significant focus for the region, particularly in the area of breast cancer. Right now, we are commercializing treatments for breast cancer with a clear vision to make it curable in cases where it is diagnosed and treated early. The ultimate goal is to truly say we have cured cancer for some patients.

Beyond breast cancer, we have a robust pipeline of around 60 molecules in development across oncology. Some of these continue the focus on breast cancer, while others target lung cancer and explore cutting-edge areas such as gene therapy and precision medicine. These advancements aim to deliver more specialized treatments tailored to individual patient needs. While breast cancer remains the cornerstone, these additional areas are poised to play a transformative role in our offerings.

Artificial intelligence is becoming an emerging trend across industries, including healthcare and pharmaceuticals. How is Lilly looking to leverage AI in the Latin American region to improve healthcare outcomes?

At a corporate level, Lilly is harnessing AI to revolutionize drug development. Traditionally, developing a molecule took us 11 years, but with advancements, we've reduced this to six years. Now, leveraging AI, our goal is to cut this timeline even further, possibly by half. This ambitious target is within reach thanks to AI's potential to accelerate processes and improve efficiencies.

For Latin America, my role is to ensure that these AI-identified molecules reach the region as quickly as possible. AI can also transform regulatory pathways, enabling us to work on approvals simultaneously across countries rather than sequentially. This would significantly reduce the time it takes for treatments to become available.

In commercialization, AI offers the opportunity to understand our customers better, enabling tailored approaches that meet specific needs. We are embedding AI into every functional area within the organization. For example, I've asked all department heads—from corporate affairs to legal—to develop AI agendas, outlining how they can integrate AI to reduce risks and maximize efficiency.

To support this shift, we've built a dedicated structure, including a tech leader and a growing data analytics team. This investment underscores our commitment to using AI to optimize every facet of our operations, from R&D to commercialization.

What is your view on the digitalization of regulatory pathways and how these improvements could make drug launches more efficient?

The movement toward digitalization in regulatory pathways is very promising. One encouraging sign is that Mexico's Health Ministry has prioritized digital transformation within its broader strategy. This focus is essential given the resource constraints many regulatory agencies face, which often lead to significant backlogs. Digitalization is the key to achieving greater efficiency without the need for extensive increases in personnel, which may not be feasible.

For example, COFEPRIS still has many manual processes. Transitioning to digital systems will accelerate these workflows, reducing approval times and improving access to innovative treatments. While increased budget allocations for regulatory bodies are still needed, digital tools can provide immediate and meaningful improvements. I'm particularly optimistic because we're already seeing progress. COFEPRIS recently launched a digital portal a few months ago, marking a tangible step forward.

While there is still room for improvement, these developments indicate that the digital transformation agenda is moving in the right direction. Ultimately, these efforts will not only benefit the regulatory process but also contribute to economic growth by improving health outcomes and workforce productivity.

How important is the Latin American region for Lilly's overall strategy, and what role does it play in the company's global growth?

Latin America, particularly Brazil and Mexico, plays a critical role in Lilly's global strategy. These two markets are among the company's top 12 globally and are projected to climb higher, potentially reaching the top 10. The region's significance stems from the immense unmet healthcare needs, particularly in areas like diabetes and obesity, where prevalence rates are some of the highest in the world.

Our goal is ambitious but achievable—to triple our business in Latin America within the next five years. This growth aligns with the tremendous demand for innovative solutions in the region and Lilly's robust pipeline, which is perfectly positioned to meet these needs. We are launching at least two new products annually and are already working across four major business units—cardiometabolic health, diabetes and obesity, Alzheimer's, immunology, and oncology. With one of the most promising pipelines in the industry, we are well-prepared for this period of accelerated growth.

As the first female leader of Lilly in the region, how are you working to empower the next generation of female talent in the pharmaceutical industry?

Empowering the next generation of female talent starts with being a visible role model. This is why, despite my busy schedule, I take on leadership roles both within Lilly and the broader pharmaceutical industry.

I dedicate a significant amount of time to mentoring, both within and outside Lilly. Within the company, we emphasize equality in recruitment processes by ensuring gender balance among candidates for every position. While we always select the best candidate for the role, we guarantee that women have an equal opportunity to compete. Once women join Lilly, we focus on their growth through structured succession planning.

We identify high-potential women and invest heavily in their development, offering mentorship, rotational experiences, and tailored development plans. For example, we might support them in improving their English or taking specialized courses. This focused approach has yielded tangible results—half of our leadership team in the region is now composed of women, who are themselves driving empowerment for others.

Additionally, I believe in engaging men in the conversation about gender equity. I am the proud mother of a son, and I recognize the importance of raising boys who value and support women. In Lilly's women empowerment initiatives, we invite men to share their perspectives as supportive partners and managers. My own career has been shaped by male mentors who believed in me and encouraged me to take on challenges, such as pursuing an MBA or moving to Brazil.

Diversity is not just about fairness—it directly impacts business outcomes. Companies benefit economically and strategically from diverse teams. By empowering women, we are driving better decisions and stronger performance across the board.

What can Lilly bring to Latin America, and conversely, what unique contributions does Latin America offer to Lilly?

Lilly has the potential to address significant unmet needs in Latin America by providing patients with innovative treatments. Our goal is to solve pressing health challenges, such as obesity and diabetes, by bringing the best therapies to the region. I envision a future where, like in the United States—where obesity rates have recently stopped increasing for the first time—Latin America could achieve a similar milestone. Imagine if, in 15 years, we could say that the prevalence of

obesity in Mexico and across Latin America has been cut in half.

Conversely, Latin America brings immense value to Lilly. The region is home to a large population of patients who contribute significantly to Lilly's research and development efforts. For instance, in global studies for key molecules in diabetes and obesity, Latin America has often represented 15% of the sample, and in some cases, Mexico alone has accounted for up to 40%. These contributions are invaluable for advancing Lilly's pipeline.

Additionally, Latin America's high-quality investigators and clinical trials infrastructure make it a critical region for development. Lilly is already the largest investor in clinical trials in Mexico within the industry, and we are prepared to double our investment as digitalization accelerates regulatory processes. This reflects our deep commitment to leveraging the region's strengths for global innovation.

Having been with Lilly for 18 years, what keeps you committed to this organization and its mission?

Several things keep me deeply committed to Lilly. First, the opportunities for personal and professional development have been incredible. Over 18 years, I have held around 10 to 12 different roles, each pushing me to grow and stretch my potential.

Second, Lilly's culture is outstanding. I have always felt respected and valued, never discriminated against, and have seen the company consistently champion diversity and inclusion.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, is Lilly's remarkable pipeline. This company has a legacy of transforming healthcare. From pioneering treatments for depression and schizophrenia to leading advancements in diabetes care—including the first insulin, GLP, and oral diabetes treatments—Lilly has consistently been at the forefront of innovation.

Finally, it is the patients who inspire me the most. In challenging moments, I think about a quote from our founder who said—if you think this is hard, imagine what the patients are going through. That perspective motivates me to act quickly and deliver solutions because our mission as Lilly is most importantly to improve lives.

What final message would you like to share with our global readers about your vision for Lilly and the healthcare sector in Latin America?

Lilly has been a part of Latin America for over 80 years—we just celebrated our 81st anniversary this year—and we remain fully committed to the region. Our focus is on launching innovations that will improve health outcomes and enhance the quality of life for people in Mexico and across Latin America.

We see a bright future ahead and are dedicated to being a transformative force in healthcare for many decades to come. Together, we can continue to make meaningful progress in addressing the region's most pressing health challenges and delivering hope to millions of patients.

[See more interviews](#)