

Interview: Özdemir Şengören, Managing Director of Turkey & MEA, UCB



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UCB's managing director for Turkey and the MEA region discusses UCB's leading patient centricity, how UCB is addressing gaps in the Turkish healthcare system surrounding epileptic patients, and the company's plan for regional expansion through partnerships.

Given your patient centricity and UCB's unique perspective, how would you assess the sectors approach to patient service?

When you ask most companies or government bodies who their end customer or target is, everyone will say the patient. These actors, be they government bodies, companies, patient organizations, or healthcare providers will also include patients on a list of their own stakeholders. At UCB we call the patient our 'true north', and do not include them on any list of stakeholders. All of the industry stakeholders should work together and cooperate to serve the patient, and all actions and strategies should 'point north'.

For Turkey, this means that we all have a shared responsibility, as a group, as the healthcare sector, to serve and help patients. Each stakeholder supports the other, yet there is also conflict. The ecosystem of relationships between players needs to be more harmonious, more balanced, generally more respectful, and this will help us all focus on delivering more added value to patients together, helping them live as they would like to be able to.

UCB is a leader in epilepsy. What is your assessment of healthcare policy and operations for epileptic patients in Turkey?

Like in many countries, epilepsy still is stigmatized in Turkey. A recent research study covered three aspects of epileptic patients lives and needs; first, the economic burden for patients and caregivers, second, a variety of social aspects and issues, and third, patient access to quality healthcare. Right now, UCB is focusing mostly on the second and third point, and compared to many countries the economic burdens are very reasonable in Turkey.

Market access includes much more than just bringing innovative products to the market, and ensuring that patients can obtain them through reimbursement. For us, it also entails working with the government to disseminate information to raise awareness, and to ensure that patients can not only get healthcare services, but find and reach the right specialists. When you drill down, you discover that in Turkey there are patients that have had an epilepsy diagnosis for many years, who can still have three or four seizures in a day, and who still complain that they can't find the right physician, an epileptologist, to treat them. Patients also complain that when visiting hospitals, they can't ask their physicians the questions they have because each patient has very limited time with the doctor.

Socially, Turkish patients are still concerned that their condition is seen as a sign of weakness, and worry that if they have a seizure in public that they will be seen as someone who is faking a seizure, or as a beggar. Or they worry that they might be fired because they have epilepsy, and patients worry about what will happen if their child has a seizure at school.

As an executive of UCB, I believe that we have the responsibility to deliver more to these patients than their medication, and to do more than our daily operations. We have to try to do something to improve the situation for these patients who are struggling to access quality medical services and advice, to combat societal stigmas against neurological diseases, and to support patients and caregivers who worry about legal implications.

I have two simple examples of such initiatives so far. The first is that we contacted the Turkish Epilepsy Society and recommended that they put a map on the association website that shows all of the epilepsy specialists in Turkey, or at least the associations' members, with their contact information. The second, is that we are working to support some patient schools or information sessions so that patients can easily address their questions to physicians at the session, and if possible a lawyer for questions of a legal nature.

Do you have plans to expand your operations in the MEA region, using Turkey as a platform?

Yes. UCB has a footprint in 18 countries in the MEA region, through a joint venture in Dubai and separate distributors in countries. Currently, we don't have any affiliates in the region, and our portfolio mainly includes our biotech products. We have started by registering these products right away, and are trying to put affordability models in place through third parties for out of pocket markets. It's a new business model for UCB in the region, although it is similar to how we operate in Latin America and Pacific Asia.

This affiliate in Istanbul is growing into a regional hub for the 'Turkey plus MEA' region. We have a leadership team here including our finance, alliance, medical, regulatory and market access directors for the region. In the future, we would like to expand into a few sub-Saharan countries. We hope that we will be able to leverage our capabilities and knowledge in our core areas to help improve the lives of patients across the region, and our strategy will be in line with our patient centricity despite targets for expansion and growth.

Will UCB be taking decisive steps to help Turkey achieve the Vision 2023 objectives?

The Vision 2023 objectives are very ambitious, and while some are feasible, there are others that are hard to achieve. However, before the industry, particularly the multinational industry, can begin making any serious plans to achieve these goals we need much more clarity such as incentives that are being offered, what is expected and how, and the roles and responsibilities of companies. Once we have much more clarity, the MNCs will be able to properly evaluate Turkey as an investment destination relative to competing markets like Brazil, Russia, South Korea, China, and other countries.

How important is it to leverage relationships with local partners in a market like Turkey?

Currently, 93 percent of our sales by volume are produced in Turkey, mostly in our established brands. This is very critical for a small company like UCB, and for our size we have made some very effective investments in partnerships like, with Pharmavision, Bilim, and Adeka. In terms of the Vision 2023 objectives, we have efficiently localized production and helped to increase the Turkish manufacturing capacity utilization rate.

What is your roadmap for growth over the next five years?

Our strategy is totally in line with the global strategy, which is to continue working with our established brands for a baseline of strong foundation, and develop our newer products, which will later include some products that are currently in phase two and three for both neurology and immunology. The immunology business is still quite new in Turkey, as we only started last year, but we believe that our products will have a real impact on the lives of patients, and that as UCB we can bring some added value to immunology patients in Turkey. We have been working in CNS area for a long time, and are already established as experts especially in epilepsy, and we will be expanding into Parkinson's.

You came to UCB a little more than a year ago, after spending some time at Merck, and prior to that Wyeth and Abbott. In terms of work styles, culture, and the overall vibe, how do you fit with UCB?

The fit is great. Over the years, I have come to prefer working in niche or specialty pharma because of the greater focus on key stakeholders, on quality over quantity, and UCB clearly fits that profile. Also the overall engagement rate is 91 percent in UCB Turkey, that I believe I also have a personal role in this.

Turkish pharma industry has become increasingly focused on profitability over the last years due to the cost containment measures. Before, the industry was very large in terms of marketing and sales teams, and the focus was more on size than profitability or operational expenses. Niche pharma is to some extent insulated from this mentality.

Above all, I appreciate working in a company like UCB because I want to be able to feel that I have some personal added value beyond metrics or targets, that I am able to make a real difference in what we deliver and how, and what I deliver as a physician to a patient. For me, UCB's defining characteristic is the patient value driven approach. For us, creating added value for patients is not just an abstract concept or objective, or our slogan "Inspired by patients, driven by science," but something that we try to do and live every day.

So, bottom line, as a physician who likes working in niche pharma where the focus is on quality not quantity, UCB is a great fit for me as the patient centricity is extremely impactful, and I find it very fulfilling to live and work in this environment, and with this mentality.

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