Interview: Dr. Pelin Eriştiren İncesu – Country President, AstraZeneca, Turkey



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AstraZeneca's Country President for Turkey discusses their efforts to build scientific leadership in Turkey in line with their global strategy and her hopes for the market access and public-private partnership environment in the coming years.

Since you became Country President, how have you applied AstraZeneca's global strategy in the unique Turkish marketplace?

Our local needs are well aligned with our global strategies, [so] initiatives from our global organization will be successful in Turkey with minimal adaptation. At present, AstraZeneca's strategy is defined by three pillars; building and maintaining scientific leadership, accelerating growth, and being a great place to work.

Over the last year, we have had a substantial impact on Turkey's pharmaceutical R&D landscape through our pioneering partnership with Koç University, which is a unique partnership between a global pharmaceutical company and a Turkish academic institution in the area of basic drug research.

The entire innovative pharmaceutical industry has brought clinical research to Turkey, however we are one of the first to bring early stage R&D to the country, and we are very proud to be pushing forward the Turkish pharmaceutical R&D community with this project. Specifically, this partnership involves an R&D transfer of several candidate molecules from AstraZeneca to Koç University. Some of the projects have progressed very well, and the Turkish scientists involved have traveled to AstraZeneca HQ in the United Kingdom to present their findings. We remain hopeful that one or two of these projects will proceed to the clinical development phase, and maybe become the first drug of Turkish origin in the coming years.

As demonstrated by this project, we are on the right track to building scientific leadership in Turkey, and there is a lot more that we are willing and able to do for the Turkish scientific community. With the high level of medical education in Turkey, educated and strong workforce in general, and the desire to succeed that I see on a daily basis it is clear that with the right resources and guidelines, the Turkish people have the potential to become scientific leaders themselves.

The other two pillars, accelerating growth and being a great place to work, fall in line with AstraZeneca's people-centric company culture. Finding and developing talent is a top priority for AstraZeneca, and my personal target is to make Turkey a center of excellence in our region, and beyond. This means pushing our people to learn and improve, and pushing them to move our organization forward, accelerating growth in the process, and then exporting them to our other affiliates in the region so they can do the same there.

What unique responsibility do you feel as the first Turkish Country President of AstraZeneca Turkey?

I have been a part of this organization for a long time, and have been involved in all of the key decisions made over the past decade, yet it is very different being the captain of the ship, and being fully responsible for the affiliate. In Turkey, it is very important to work closely with the key decision makers, to build real and strong partnerships with stakeholders, as well as to maximize the level of investment for our patients; as the first Turkish Country President of AstraZeneca Turkey, it is ultimately my responsibility to find meaningful solutions for both my country and my company.

Luckily, I am confident that this will be possible in the near future. Obviously, there are risks to take and opportunities to follow. I believe the trick is to find a balance between the two, and engage in the right risks at the right time. I believe that we will be taking some risks in the near future,

because the timing is right, and it will be the right thing to do to develop the organization.

Is the mentality of government becoming more open to negotiation and collaboration with the industry?

Yes, it most certainly is. We are in constant contact with not only the ministry of health, but also the ministry of labor and social security, the ministry of development, ministry of industry, the treasury, and many other government stakeholders. The challenge is addressing the right need that shall bring all parties together and create a valuable program for our patients.

But overall, I would say yes, the government is increasingly open to partnering or generating solutions. We partner with the government in different social and corporate responsibility programs, clinical research or training and education projects on a regular basis, so they are now used to working with us. The environment is much more open and welcoming today, there is still room for improvement and I am confident that the collaboration will get stronger in the upcoming period.

Given these partnerships, how would you describe the government's perception of the pharmaceutical industry at present, particularly with relation to healthcare sustainability?

The pharmaceutical industry has been focusing on registration, access and pricing issues in the last couple of years. We have seen some progress on the market access side, as the decision makers are prioritizing some innovative medicines as GMP category one, and allowing parallel submissions.

As for prices, we encourage the introduction of a new pricing and reimbursement model that better recognizes the value of innovative medicines. Having said that, for AstraZeneca price has never been a unique parameter when making the decision to bring a product to Turkey. Addressing an unmet need has always been the top priority. We are very excited for the future as we have yet to bring several promising molecules to Turkey, and we look forward to doing so as soon as possible, particularly for our strong pipeline in oncology and respiratory medicine which includes some breakthrough molecules.

Is HQ supportive of this policy, or is it something you have had to fight for?

The main value of AstraZeneca is putting the patient first and this is the reference point for decision-making process in each step of our daily lives. That’s why we put all the effort to develop life-changing medicines and ensure delivery of these treatments to the patients.

Based on this perspective AZ HQ is very supportive to be the partner of solutions for the unmet needs within the pharma environment and accordingly to enable the access of innovative medicines to the patients.

We understand that you hosted a leadership in respiratory medicine conference last year; what were some of the impacts of this event?

This was an event that we hosted in Istanbul for pulmonologists across the MEA region; most of the key key opinion leaders were present, and all of the new developments in respiratory medicines were discussed with the audience. Perhaps more importantly, the conference also had a strong domestic impact as the three Turkish pulmonology associations came together and spent some time discussing and analyzing local dynamics, needs, and risks, and as a result of the discussions a joint position paper was published on how to better collaborate with the healthcare authorities, and with each other. Overall, the conference was very successful at both the regional and local levels, and the response from attendees was strongly positive.

Looking forward three to five years, what is the vision for AstraZeneca, what story will you tell us when we come back?

People are always my priority, whether patients, employees, or research partners, so my key goals for the next few years are all related to people. At present, AstraZeneca Turkey consists of 500 people including our field force, and I would like to say that we have 500 strong leaders who are very committed to the company.

In terms of specific initiatives and objectives, we would like to see the first Turkish drug discovered by our partners at Koç University. We are trying to be pioneers in R&D overall, and I would love to see some concrete achievements such as public-private partnerships directly with ministries, or industry associations. Also, we hope that we will be able to introduce two new innovative oncology products which have the potential to save many lives within the next two or three years, as they have been submitted under the accelerated approval program.

Do you have a final message for our readers?

As AstraZeneca, we strongly believe in Turkey, and believe that AstraZeneca, with its strong pipeline of innovative medicines, can help to save the lives of Turkish patients. Thus, we will do our best to bring these medicines to Turkey, and while we may need some support, we will be here for the Turkish patients.

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