Umut Meriç – General Manager, Chiesi Turkey



24.09.2018

Tags: Turkey, Chiesi, Respiratory, Rare Diseases

Two months into the role, Umut Meriç, general manager for Chiesi Turkey, discusses the affiliate's rapid progression and his plans to ensure Turkish patients benefit from the global company's latest therapies in the respiratory and rare diseases areas. Meriç underlines the importance of motivating and developing a productive, dynamic and energetic team to drive the company to new heights in Turkey.

Can you provide an overview of the Chiesi operations in Turkey?

Founded back in 2007, Chiesi Turkey has been present for 11 years now. The affiliate has been progressing very dynamically in the competitive Turkish market: as a matter of fact, we have doubled sales in the past five years, and in 2017 we grew by little over 20 percent. Above all, our ambition is to create value for stakeholders, society, and patients and embed this philosophy in the way we do our business. In parallel to that, people at the core of our organization are very crucial, and most of the successes that we have in Turkey are related to the effort put by our teams to develop our capabilities. We invest significantly in our personal and professional development, and our team is highly motivated and engaged and results oriented.

Our major strength is in the respiratory therapeutic area, and we have been a major player in this field in Turkey with our Inhaled Corticosteroid (ICS)/Long-acting β2-agonist (LABA) in the treatment of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and asthma. In the future, we plan to launch our

triple combination ICS/LABA/long-acting muscarinic antagonist (LAMA), which is the first in class product in Europe, a critical therapy for COPD patients, and our DPI formulations. With these products, we will not only strengthen our role in respiratory, but also add value for the treatment of COPD, which has become the 3rd major source of mortality globaly. Furthermore, we are working on business development initiatives to support our business. We will launch a new allergy product this year off the back of an acquisition made in September. Our other core area is Neanotology. Our surfactant product is indicated for the rescue treatment of Respiratory Distress Syndrome (RDS) in premature infants and reduces mortality and pneumothoraces associated with RDS. We are the leader both in Turkey and Worldwide market and our product helped thousands of babies to hold on to life.

How does Chiesi global view the situation in Turkey?

Despite the economic challenges Turkey & the pharmaceutical industry faces, headquarters continue to understand the importance and potential in the market, and we are working on both product and portfolio acquisitions to expand our footprint in the country.

Investment decisions must be made from a broader timeframe standpoint, and when we look at Turkey in the last 20 to 30 years, we have shown tremendous growth and improvement in our processes. The healthcare space today compared with 30 years ago has drastically changed. The country is still in its growth phase and shows fantastic potential for the future, as we overcome challenges in our way. With its young and aging population and potential future demographics, Turkey will always remain to be an important market.

How is Chiesi involved in the fulfillment of ‘Vision 2023’ objectives?

We work in two major areas as part of Vision 2023. First of all, we intend to localize some of our portfolio to local manufacturers, particularly our allergy and respiratory portfolio—this aligns well with the government approach to increase the domestic production of locally consumed medicines.

Concerning R&D, we have already invested Euros 1.5 million [USD 1.71 million] into clinical trials – including 15 reference centers – which again ties in with the ambitions of the government to bring more innovation-oriented investments to Turkey.

What are your objectives for the next four years for Chiesi?

My number one priority is our people; we invest heavily in HR and its development area, and it is the space that will carry the company into the future. We have development projects and a leadership program for our managers locally, in which we identify the areas which employees would like to strengthen, before adopting a two-year program around these goals. For talent development, Chiesi also offers great development opportunities, and we work closely with Italy's Bocconi University, with which we provide executive programs that are currently attended by five employees of Chiesi Turkey, myself included. From a global and local standpoint, our emphasis is people development, and we see results in Turkey too: my predecessor Filiz Balçay, just got appointed Chiesi's head of cluster Benelux and CEE while our primary care sales manager took over my previous role as Business Unit Director. We are capable of recruiting from inside the organization because we have the strength in depth.In order to shape our future, we offer opportunities to our employees and we encourage them so as to take roles on global projects and positions .

My second priority is to establish successful launches, mainly Trimbow®, the first triple combination product (ICS/LABA/LAMA) in the respiratory area that has been approved in Europe. Trimbow® will be the future for our portfolio, creating value for stakeholders, the healthcare budget and patients alike.

In terms of business objectives, we are on the verge of completing the next strategic plan, while we are already a Top 60 company in Turkey after only 11 years on the market. We posted turnover of over 100 million TL in 2017 and our 2023 ambition was to reach 200, but we anticipate reaching it much sooner.

Rare diseases will be another critical focus area looking forward. Due to the fact that one of each five marriages in Turkey is still a consanguineous marriage, many inherited and recessively transmitted rare diseases are more prevalent in our country than in Europe and the US. As a matter of fact, it is estimated that approximately 6-7 million people in our country have rare diseases. In this regard, we plan to leverage Chiesi's global leadership in Cystic Fibrosis *[a family inherited disease which affects the secretory glands of many organs – Ed],* modere to severe Limbal stem cell deficiency (LSCD) resulting from physical or chemical burns in adults eye(s), as well as Alpha-Mannosidosis, a very rarely seen lysosomal storage disorder characterized by immunodeficiency, facial and skeletal system anomalies, hearing impairment and cognitive impairment. In addition to our existing portfolio, Chiesi is working on global BD initiatives to strengthen our portfolio and presence in the area of rare diseases.

Leveraging on your experience as former Business Unit Director of Chiesi Turkey's primary care franchise, what is your assessment of the Turkish market in this area and the key success factors to be implemented?

At over TRY1 billion, the respiratory market is one of the most significant therapeutic areas in Turkey. In this regard, we observe huge investments at a local level to ensure high-quality products are on offer nationwide, and the market is highly competitive: notably, we see 26 competitors for our main product. Domestic companies moreover make up over 50 percent of the market.

To be successful in this market, the key is to differentiate and offer an attractive pipeline to maintain the portfolio. The quality of the work we do at Chiesi, from medical communication to creating value for patients, sets us apart from the competition, as well as our unique inhaler platform and our extrafine formulations that offer different approaches to the status quo on the market.

In April 2016, when *Pharmabaordroom* met with Alberto Chiesi, president of the group, he highlighted the importance of internationalization for the company as well as the fact that affiliates are more effective than distributors to convey the 'Chiesi Brand' in a given market. Do you believe the Chiesi brand is already well recognized by external stakeholders in Turkey?

We have come a long way concerning building our reputation, but it is still one of the key strategic development avenues for the Turkish affiliate — making Chiesi more visible across the Turkish ecosystem. We interact with payers, healthcare experts and authorities, as well as pharmacies, with which we strive to maintain top communication. We are also well known in the areas where we keep a focus such as the respiratory arena, but bolstering the company's overall recognition in Turkey is of equal importance. The Chiesi values are strong, and Turkish stakeholders already have a good sense of this – but our ambitions is to bring this recognition to the next level.

In the grand scheme of things, I would like to position Chiesi as a stakeholder that strives to create value for patients while carrying out our work in a very ethical, transparent and sustainable manner — in line with our values — and contributing to society. This is the global vision for Chiesi, which is why we work on being a 'benefit corporation' where 16 different parameters from the environment to climate to ethics are evaluated strictly for certification. Our vision for the affiliate is also to

improve in as many of these areas as possible, to ensure that we are creating value for our society.

You had experiences in several Big Pharma companies prior to joining Chiesi in January 2015. What differentiates Chiesi?

Being part of a family-controlled mid-sized pharmaceutical company offers fantastic advantages. We are not present on the stock market which means we can put the needs of the company above stakeholders, and therefore, better serve patients. From a cultural perspective, in Chiesi, everybody knows each other, and we operate a tight-knit nature and relish meeting face to face. For example, we do not conduct teleconferences but purely video or face-to-face meetings. Everybody is reachable, from the CEO of the group to a sales rep, which is why our motto is ‘Every one of us is Chiesi.’ I enjoyed working at the other companies across my career, but these cultural aspects are particularly relevant to me now at Chiesi.

What would your final message be to our international readers?

Turkey is still an attractive, rapidly changing country — the difference you see upon flying into Istanbul in the past twenty years is dramatic. As a country, we have several challenges to overcome in order to continue this growth, but as – we have proven in the past – Turkey will continue onwards regardless.

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