Kazim Dinç – Chairman of the Board, SURDER, Turkey



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Kazim Dinç, chairman of the board of SURDER and former Minister of Health of Turkey, offers his insights into the Turkish OTC and health products market, highlighting the challenges facing the industry and SURDER's role in bringing about constructive reforms.

Can you start by introducing SURDER to our readership of global executives?

We are the largest association for consumer healthcare products in Turkey. SURDER was established in 2007 in order to promote productive regulation for healthcare products and the safe use of OTC products by the public. We have a total of 80 members, comprised of individuals, corporations, lawyers, and communication partners.

Our organization connects the pharmaceutical sector with the government – specifically, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Agriculture. We play a major role in the drafting of laws, and we are ultimately the voice of the industry to the government and the messenger of the government to the industry. Before SURDER was established, there was a sizeable gap in communication between the government and the OTC sector.

When the organization started a little over ten years ago, the focus was on non-prescription medicines, only. When I took the helm in 2012, though, we broadened our scope to food supplements, OTCs, traditional herbal products, phytotherapies, medical devices, cosmetics and dermocosmetics, biocidals, and just recently, homeopathic products. The organization went

through a period of significant development when I took my post: we changed our name from RUDER to SURDER (to reflect our shifted focus from non-prescriptions to healthcare products, at large) and we hosted comprehensive industrial meetings, attended by government ministers and executives. My experience as Minister of Health and my connections in the government has opened many doors for our members.

What are some of the keynote achievements so far as the Chairman of the Board of SURDER?

Opening up the forum of discourse among our members is my first notable achievement in this role. The communication between industry stakeholders improved greatly once we restructured the association. It strengthened our credibility, collective mission and capacity to engage with government actors.

My second achievement is having created regular interaction between our board of directors and the ministries that govern our sector. Before we implemented this practice, the Ministries of Health and Agriculture used to simply pass regulation that they saw fit, without consulting industry stakeholders. If companies needed revisions or redactions made to these laws, they would have to *ex-post facto*. Now, we work with lawmakers in the drafting process, ensuring that what gets passed is what best reflects the needs of the industry and the needs of society at large.

My third accomplishment is our habitual accumulation of new members and newfound dedication from existing members. We have executives that serve as board members and on working committees, all pro bono. SURDER has working groups focusing on OTC, traditional herbal products, biocidal products, cosmetics and dermo-cosmetics, medical devices and food supplements. The enthusiasm from our members is quite inspiring, as each of our participants offers their valuable industry knowledge and experience as a free resource to their peers.

The Turkish Healthcare Products market is growing year by year, but many speculate that it is still smaller than what it should be. What do you see as the outstanding challenges facing the members of SURDER?

For our OTC members, the greatest challenge is the lack of OTC regulation. Last year, our members worked tirelessly to develop a proposal for such regulation for the government – we actually had a full-day congress on the topic with members of the Ministry of Health and industry. Following the

all-day meeting, the government sent us a provisional list of recognized OTC products. This list was received with controversy by some of our members, and the codification of OTC laws in Turkey was delayed. Further delays are not ideal for the Turkish market – there are many multinational OTC companies that are eagerly waiting for the Turkish government to pass concrete legislation on the matter so that they can invest in Turkish expansion. The problem is, though, that some of our members are not satisfied with the list if their products are not included; they worry that the omission means that they will not be able to get their products reimbursed if doctors prescribe them.

The situation is a bit murkier than it seems, though – while many companies eagerly await the OTC legislation, other, smaller companies do not want to see it passed. From their point of view, codified OTC regulation will pave the way for MNCs to enter the market, run television ads, and drive SMEs out of business. One multinational, for instance, recently started an ad campaign and has consequently faced a backlash from many in the pharmaceutical value chain. Moreover, it will be difficult to sort out the matter of reimbursement – naturally, products that are not prescribed will not be reimbursed, but does this mean that we need to expand prescriptions to include products that are commonly sold over-the-counter in other countries? These problems have not been solved, and the list of approved OTC products is not finalized (although it has been published).

Ultimately, we do need OTC regulation. But perhaps we need to pursue a novel model.

There is a global trend of non-prescription drug companies embracing E-Commerce. How does SURDER and its member companies feel about online sales platforms in Turkey?

The pharmacy infrastructure in Turkey is more than sufficient for optimal product distribution – there are over 25,000 pharmacies across the country that are efficient and receptive to patients' needs. Many pharmacists will even deliver to patients' houses. Patients are satisfied, and there is no need for an alternate distribution platform. Additionally, given that the Turkish pharmaceutical industry is strictly monitored by the Ministry of Health, E-Commerce might not be seen as ideal because it is hard to monitor.

Turkish pharmacies are embracing technological solutions in a different manner – for instance, many pharmacists are now able to refill prescriptions via WhatsApp requests.

What is SURDER doing to increase the awareness of proper OTC usage among the Turkish population?

While the Turkish Pharmacists' Association constantly calls for a heightened medical literacy of the population, I believe that Turkey already has a satisfactory understanding of pharmaceutical products. The notion that there is a societal ignorance is quite overstated. As a pharmacist myself, with 45 years of experience, I feel confident that our system in Turkey is sufficient in informing the public of proper drug usage. Pharmacists in Turkey play a pivotal role in patients' health; they are the consultants that instruct patients in dosage and frequency, and they are always available when patients have questions.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Health has recently implemented "readability tests" for all drug packages in Turkey. If a random sample of ten patients is not able to read and understand the instructions for drug usage, a product may not access the market. Now, bear in mind that the Ministry of Agriculture is not yet doing this – but they soon will, as the two ministries are merging their platforms in regards to OTC products, supplements, cosmetics, etc. SURDER played a great role in drafting these regulations for the Ministry of Agriculture, as only a few years ago, there was no regulation at all surrounding food supplements.

What is your 'Vision 2023' for the OTC and Health Products Sector in Turkey?

Soon, there will be an OTC registration and an official list of approved products. The self-care concept will be more accepted, and the self-medication market will be larger, accordingly. Secondly, all products that have health claims will officially fall under the purview the Ministry of Health, either entirely or jointly with the Ministry of Agriculture. Thirdly, I expect Turkey to be a hub for biotechnology, R&D and innovation. While we are grappling with a devaluation at the moment, we should see seven or eight percent growth per year in the pharmaceutical sector whenever the economic troubles pass. When I was Minister of Health, I guided the industry through a similar crisis; we were able to rebound with prudency and strategic decisions. With our projects on the agenda and our PICS (Pharmaceutical Inspection Co-Operation Scheme) membership, we are poised to increase our exports and "Go Beyond," indeed.

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