

Levent Canyurt - CEO & Founder, BIEM Ilac, Turkey



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Levent Canyurt, CEO and founder of BIEM Ilac, shares how he transformed the company from a domestic pharmaceutical distributor into an international player, with an innovative portfolio for the treatment of rare diseases. He also highlights the importance of greater collaboration between stakeholders in the Turkish biotech industry and gives insights on his vision for BIEM both in the domestic and international market.

Can you introduce yourself to our international readers and explain why you decided to establish BIEM?

I founded BIEM, a pharmaceutical marketing, manufacturing and distribution company in 1990, starting as the exclusive Turkish distributor of Cutter, Miles Bayer and Talecris for products treating blood-related diseases. In 2011 we ended these distribution agreements and BIEM started producing its own products from scratch. Since 2015, we have also been exporting products. As of today, we are present in 22 countries, including North America, Chile, CEE, Russia, South Africa, ASEAN, MENA and CIS countries, either through distributors or our own affiliates. We have recruited many international professionals, who are now based in Ankara and coordinate the overseas operations from there.

BIEM is committed to providing innovative solutions across a range of therapeutic areas, including oncology, haematology, radiology, ophthalmology and neurology, with a proprietary portfolio of 31

high-value branded pharmaceutical products in Turkey. Orphan drugs, especially in the oncology field, are our products with the biggest potential, as we have very good relations with hospitals focusing on rare diseases, for instance in India. Oncology and ophthalmology products each make up more than a quarter of our portfolio. In 2015, we also started launching products in the therapeutic area of intensive care.

What differentiates your company from the rest of the Turkish industry?

We are achieving growth in our therapeutic fields with an innovative approach, as we are always focused on producing the best quality products in terms of safety and efficiency. Our emphasis on orphan drugs is our main differential point, as it allows us to be the only provider of certain drugs on the Turkish market, for example for the active ingredient Cladribine with our product OCLADRA®. However, there are not many incentives for orphan drugs in Turkey, which makes us a pioneer in our industry. Contrary to our competitors, we are not only importing and licensing orphan drugs but actually developing and manufacturing them here in Turkey. We expect a steady growth in this therapeutic market thanks to our developing portfolio.

What needs to happen to transform Turkey into a global biotech hub by 2020, as proposed by the government?

The social security system in Turkey provides 100 percent coverage for the population, which is the main reason for the attractiveness for the Turkish market despite economic volatility. This will encourage international investors to further invest in the country.

Nevertheless, in Turkey a common theme is of companies doing their own research and product development, meaning that collaboration within the industry is very limited. However, this is essential to speeding up the pace of development, as Turkey is currently far behind other states in terms of the advancements made by its biotech sector, with only eight to ten companies active at this point. Moreover, Turkish biotech companies are usually developing products based on the same molecules, so greater collaboration would save a huge amount in terms of costs, as we are essentially working on products for the treatment of the same diseases.

While I am aware that there is competition between companies, there are still projects, which would suit well as opportunities for collaboration. Therefore, we need to follow a realistic approach in Turkey, strengthening the partnerships between the industry and academic and public research

institutions. This is also crucial to retaining human resources in the country, as otherwise, many biologists and molecular biologists will go abroad, perceiving that there is a lack of prospects in Turkey. Collaboration between all stakeholders is needed to become a strong international player in this field.

What is your internationalization strategy?

As part of its strategy, BIEM has accelerated its expansion activities and product portfolio with a big focus on registration, sales, marketing and manufacturing on the domestic and international pharmaceutical market. Generally, partnerships are our preferred way to internationalize. Hence, we have collaborations with UrsaPharm in Germany, Panacea Biotech in India, Farma-Derma in Italy and Dongkook in Korea. We are proud to say that our international business is increasing due to our overseas sales activity through new product registrations in more than 11 countries.

The European market is our main focus at the moment, however, our long-term vision is, of course, to bring our products to the US as well. BIEM is working with three contract manufacturers for European countries currently, as we do not hold a GMP certification from the EU. Our manufacturing partners include highly-valued players such as Birgi Mefar, Idol Ilac and Mustafa Nevzat, which is now Amgen.

While concentrating on specialty prescription pharmaceuticals, we will also consider acquiring generic pharmaceuticals. We continue to identify such product opportunities and specialty areas, that fit our capabilities and enhance our future business objectives.

In our partnerships, BIEM shares the desire to bring novel therapeutics to patients on a local and global basis. We are committed to continued and strategic growth through targeted product acquisitions, in-licensing new opportunities and forming mutually beneficial business partnerships. As we are looking for greater capacity, we are open to new partnerships with both distributors and other contract manufacturers. Working with distributors, that know the target market well has been a very successful strategy for BIEM, so we prefer this option over opening our own affiliate in a country.

Where do you want to see BIEM in five years?

BIEM wants to become the first remedy for saving lives by increasing life quality with high-tech, pioneering products, while also being the only remedy able to provide drugs produced with innovative technology without pursuing high-profit margins, for illnesses that affect only a small percentage of the population.

As the new phase of our globalization strategy, BIEM aims to develop its own manufacturing and R&D capabilities in Turkey, which will open very soon. For this purpose, BIEM selected oncology line as a strategic market to focus and invest. With this respect, we are preparing for a greenfield investment for manufacturing generic oncology drugs which are oral solid dosage forms in Turkey. In our facility, we are planning to produce cytotoxic and high potent products which will help to sustain a steady growth in the Turkish market by adding innovative oncology products. To enable the company to export to the US and European countries, our facility will comply with FDA/EU/Turkish GMP and ISO directives including any others regulatory obligations pertaining to Good Manufacturing Practices.

There is no doubt that there is a crisis in Turkey currently, but BIEM is trying to see this as a chance to become a global company in the healthcare industry within three years. Moreover, Turkey is a very important geopolitical player and we make investments in our country to use it as a bridge for our international expansion.

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