

# Demet Eryilmaz - General Manager Turkey, Queisser

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*Queisser Pharma is a German company focused on the OTC market through food supplements and medical devices. Its general manager for Turkey, Demet Eryilmaz, tells the “special” story of its major brand Doppelherz, analyzes the regulatory environment for OTC products in the country, and explains how the pandemic has transformed the sector.*

**Since it is the first time we interview you or the company, can you begin by explaining your background and how you became involved with Queisser Pharma?**

I am an environmental engineer and started my career as a medical rep with GlaxoSmithKline while doing my MBA studies. Part of my professional experience includes work with both local and multinational companies doing sales, marketing and managerial positions for OTC and Rx. I managed big organizations like Bayer, where I led a team of 220 people, and also went through restructuring processes, joint venture projects and business development.

After 27 years, of which 15 were spent on Rx and 12 on OTC, I fell in love with the latter; it is the shining star of the sector. My first exposure to OTC was with Abdi Ibrahim, but I must admit that I was reluctant at first since my expertise was on Rx. My director told me that most people knew Rx and being an expert in OTC, understanding its peculiar regulations and dynamics, would be very valuable for my career; and he was right.

I joined Queisser Pharma precisely because it is a company focused solely on OTC, an area that is sometimes overlooked in big companies in favour of Rx. Queisser has a strong international heritage, being established more than 120 years ago in Germany, but prior to entering the Turkish market with its own subsidiary in 2015, had only been present in the country for 15 years in partnership with distributors. When they decided to create a direct presence, they offered me the opportunity to lead the effort; it was my first startup experience, leading a nascent organization that had to launch products from scratch.

**Beyond being focused exclusively on OTC products, what attracted you to Queisser Pharma? What makes it a special company?**

Queisser has a special and compelling story. Before World War I, it produced personal care products such as dental and soaps in Germany. During the war period, the owner and founder who was also a pharmacist, Alfred Queisser, noticed that women were left taking care of families while men were at war, many of whom never returned, and were struggling to feed the children. He thought that there should be a product that could provide sufficient nutrition to the entire family and launched the first food supplement products under the Doppelherz brand, which is translated as “double hearts” in English.

The logo of Doppelherz is composed of two hearts, one red and the other black. The red heart represented health and the black one represented the war. The brand has been in the market for 100 years and remains the leader in Germany; the Doppelherz name is more than a brand for Queisser, it is similar to Bayer and Aspirin where the public can instantly recognize the company by mentioning the product.

**Are Doppelherz products your main brand in Turkey or do you have more of the company's portfolio present in the market?**

In Turkey we focus mostly on Doppelherz because there is a huge market for them, but we also have Protefix and other brands coming up. In Germany, however, Queisser has four main brands and over 300 SKUs, which increase every year because of continued innovation. The company is growing by double digits in its home market almost every year, which is also happening in Turkey although we are a relatively new player in the market.

There are three pillars for the OTC market in Turkey. First, we have prescribers (doctors, specialists, dentists, etc.), then we have pharmacists because they are our main sales channel, and finally, consumers, not patients, which are our priority. I could add a fourth channel, although it is related to pharmacies, and they are wholesalers because they are preferred by companies. A new addition will be online commerce which has increased during the pandemic. Turkey has important regulations for direct-to-consumer sales, but they are allowed; however, there will be a strong reaction from pharmacies if a B2C model proliferates. Most pharmacies are privately-owned and independent, making pharmacy chains rare, but that is the debate at the moment.

**With 12 years of experience in Turkey's OTC market, what can you comment on its current regulatory system, particularly the elements that affect Queisser's products?**

Within OTC, food supplements and medical devices, which are two areas where Queisser competes, have very different regulations. For example, our Protefix medical devices follow straightforward rules that allow companies to set prices freely, unlike pharmaceuticals that are controlled by the Ministry of Health (MoH).

On the other hand, food supplements are in a more complicated situation because they have to be registered with the Ministry of Agriculture which, unlike the MoH, does not require products to be produced with GMP standards, making the quality of some products significantly lower. Queisser, as a reputable international organization, has a strict commitment to quality and international health standards. Unfortunately, some local companies do not share that approach.

While the MoH generally has developed smart regulations, there are some areas where it can improve. For example, they are responsible for approving labels that appear on the exterior of OTC products and the decisions can often seem arbitrary.

**Taking your Doppelherz food supplements as an example, are they required to go through clinical studies or a similar process?**

There are no clinical studies required for the food supplement products in Turkey as long as they do not make a direct claim, instead, trials are required for ingredients to ensure their safety. While the authorities do not require clinical trials for food supplements, customers do ask for proof and evidence that products work.

**What did you mean by the OTC market being the “shining star” of the industry in Turkey, and what is Queisser’s position in that star?**

By that, I mean that the sector has undergone a big transformation. Ten years ago, we were fighting for awareness because there was no knowledge about improving your own health without going to a doctor in Turkey. Perhaps because of the pandemic, the population has taken a closer look at their health and lifestyle, understanding that being healthy can be the difference between life or death during unexpected emergencies, not only in the long term.

People noticed that food supplements, vitamins, minerals, and other substances can help them improve the immune system. There is a proactive attitude.

Due to high demand, the sector ran out of stock, we were unprepared for such a situation. Fortunately for Queisser, German brands are very popular in Turkey because consumers rightly associate them with high quality and high technology, plus, they are more willing to spend on supplements, that is why the sector is the shining star. The OTC market grew 30 percent last year and of the 200 companies in the market, 50-55 are newcomers.

This is our fourth year in the market, and we already rank 16<sup>th</sup> out of 200; we still have a long way to go. We see big growth opportunities in Turkey. In fact, Turkey is sometimes the second country where the company launches a product after Germany.

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