

# Andrew Bird – Interim Chief Executive Officer, Acino

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*Speaking as GM and*

*head of the Middle East, Turkey, and Africa region, Andrew Bird, who has since become Acino's Interim Chief Executive Officer, discusses the Swiss company's being global but acting local approach to emerging markets and outlines the importance of the META region, which accounts for 35 percent of Acino's global revenues.*

**Please walk us through your career trajectory and what led you to join Acino.\***

I graduated with a PhD in Chemistry in the UK and began my career as a Research Chemist. Although I enjoyed the industry, I quickly realised my skills and interests were better suited to the commercial world of pharmaceuticals. I chose to quit my job, completed an MBA from Cranfield School of Management in the UK and then joined a multi-national pharmaceutical company in 1999. Over the next decade I held multiple positions starting as a Medical Sales Representative in the UK and then taking the traditional route of moving through various sales and marketing roles.

In 2009, I took a life changing opportunity and moved to Dubai with my family for a Regional Marketing Director role covering Africa and the Middle East. A number of years later I was promoted to the role of General Manager for the Gulf Region. In the summer of 2018, I was approached by

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Acino to join in what is my current position of General Manager, Head of the Region, for Middle East, Turkey and Africa region (META). At the time of joining, the company was going through a restructure, and I was chosen as part of a team to stimulate growth and continue our upward trajectory.

**Editor's Note:** *Since this interview took place, Andrew Bird has been promoted to Interim CEO of Acino.*

### **Have you been able to achieve that goal of continual growth?**

Absolutely. Our upward path has been fantastic. Since the end of 2018, we have turned around Acino in the region. We are now a company known for exciting growth opportunities. For my region specifically, this has also been assisted by the successful integration of the primary care business unit we acquired from Takeda in 2020 and we continue to be market leaders in our defined categories.

### **Acino is defined in different markets by either its business-to-consumer (B2C) or business-to-business (B2B) operations. What are the key areas of focus in META?**

At a group level, Acino operates predominately in the B2C space. In my region, META, we have a regional presence in 15 markets, operating directly in the key markets of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Egypt, Turkey and the Gulf. We have strong leadership in digestive health as well as the therapeutic areas of anti-infectives and pain.

### **Unlike many pharma companies which focus on larger and more stable markets like the US and Europe, Acino is focused on emerging markets. Why is this the case and how do you manage a region that is ever changing and brings its own unique challenges?**

Emerging markets are an exciting place to work in, offering a very diverse and dynamic operating environment. They contain countries that have some of the world's fastest growing economies, with continued population expansions and increasing GDP. There are many opportunities for high quality effective medicines.

As a global pharmaceutical company headquartered in Switzerland, we operate with a Swiss mindset in everything we do, from the quality of the products we sell, to how we work with healthcare professionals, partners, and relevant stakeholders. However, in each market we adopt a variety of business models to succeed, essentially being global but acting local. In emerging markets you cannot simply take a mature market strategy and try to force it to work.

### **Does working in these emerging markets require a certain profile of employee?**

Everyone I have ever met who works in this industry is special, all having a dedication to make a difference to lives of patients. In emerging markets, it is no different. At Acino, we strive to create an environment that is engaging to work in. Diversity and inclusion are at the heart of what we do, although one key attribute that always shows up in an Acino employee is the real desire to get things done. It is not surprising that "execution" is one of our core behaviours.

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## **What is the importance of META for the company within its global operations?**

We make up approximately 35 percent of global revenues and are always looking to grow to increase our footprint within local communities allowing patients to get access to high-quality effective medicines. As we continue to grow so do internal opportunities offering employees the possibility of career advancement.

## **What is the significance of the UAE for Acino?**

We are very proud to be based here out of Dubai. Geographically, Dubai is excellent, as you can move seamlessly around the region and for incoming products that are sourced around the world it is very accessible. Furthermore, the UAE is a leading healthcare economy in the region and our products have a place here.

We have recently acquired a manufacturing facility in the UAE, where we produce products for local sales, and being GCC and EU GMP certified, will allow therapies to be exported to Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the Africa region.

## **What are your current main priorities as general manager for this region?**

Firstly, the people at Acino. We want to have an engaging organisation that promotes a culture of growth, not only for the business, but for an employee's career.

Secondly, to ensure our current business is sustainable and continues to grow within our therapeutic areas. Acting responsibly and having high growth ambitions must go hand in hand to build a sustainable organisation. Compliance is a bedrock to our business.

And finally, the third part is to continue looking at opportunities in the region that add value to the business and again allow local patients access to high quality effective medicines. We have global and local business development teams that focus on growth through partnerships and M&As.

As a company we are extremely ambitious and everything we do is done through a growth lens. If you look at emerging markets, there is an immense room for growth and incredible potential. The nations are starting to develop at a rapid rate, and this brings market gaps to leverage. Furthermore, the population is rising in numbers and ageing, so in 10 to 20 years the diseases we witness in a more elderly patient in the western markets will emerge here, so the systems must be ready with medicines for these patients.

## **Acino covers a broad range of therapeutic areas globally, but how is this represented in your region?**

Just over 50 percent of our sales here are in digestive health care and we are leading in each category we are present within this field. Our next two main sectors are anti-infective health and pain management. We are also growing in cardiovascular and respiratory.

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**Partnering with key stakeholders is important for companies to grow their local footprint, and you talked about the need to act in a local way. How does Acino approach this within the region?**

We add value by having a local approach and are very much intertwined in the local healthcare strategies. We are proactive in our approach in educating healthcare professionals, helping them understand more about the disease areas we operate in and how to utilise our medicines in the best way possible.

In the UAE, we have our very own manufacturing facility, which fully produces our products locally for patients in the UAE and other GCC countries. There is also an added value to the local UAE economy with this part of our business.

**Where will we see Acino META in the next few years?**

Acino will continue to grow and find ways to deliver more medicines to more patients in the region. We will not look for just pure growth, but to be sustainable and build a brand name that is highly considered as a strong partner in the region and an upholder of leading compliance and ethics as well as ESG practices. Furthermore, I want to make sure we continue to be a great place to work. I want Acino to be a workplace where people love to work and thrive, that facilitates career progression and is viewed as a positive step in any professional's pharmaceutical journey.

*\*This interview was conducted when Andrew Bird was holding the position of General Manager, Head of Region, Middle East, Turkey, and Africa, Acino.*

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