

Ingrid Drechsel – Pharma Cluster Division Head, Bayer Turkey & Iran



We are on board with the idea of including Turkey in more clinical trials. Today, the country is very involved with Bayer's innovative products from the beginning

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Ingrid Drechsel, head of Bayer's pharma operations in Turkey and Iran, discusses the complexity of managing two countries under economic pressure and the advantages of Bayer's longstanding relationship in both markets with a track record of six decades. In addition, Drechsel explains how the German company has moved from fifth to third place in terms of revenue in the local market, investing heavily in clinical trials, e-health and local production to support Turkey's Vision 2023.

Can you begin by introducing your background and career at Bayer?

I am a biologist by training, which serves me well in the pharmaceutical field. I started my career as a medical rep for three years which gave me a basic understanding of our business and relationships with customers. After that, I had several marketing, operational and management functions, working in Japan, Indonesia, South Korea and now Turkey and Iran.

Counted as one, Turkey and Iran, the countries under your management, have almost 170 million people which is the equivalent of Spain, Italy and France together. What is the importance of your country portfolio within the global Bayer organization considering that large population?

Turkey and Iran are very important and delicate countries because of the challenges we have to deal with, particularly in Iran due to the economic sanctions. Nevertheless, both countries have huge potential and are economically strong. Turkey will play a much bigger role because the market is currently around the 18th largest in the world, but it is expected to soon be the 14th; Turkish GDP will grow much more than the European average this year. I believe in the agility of both countries and their bright future because the population across these two countries is used to coping with uncertainties, which is not the case in Central European countries. These countries are struggling with the pandemic much more because they're not used to being agile unlike people in Turkey and Iran.

Regarding your operations in Iran, some executives with the country in their portfolio have explained that it is not easy to introduce products into the market or to take money out of the country. What has been your experience in Iran?

Indeed, the challenge is finding the hard currency money to pay for the products but, due to our long presence in Iran after operating there for over 60 years, we're aligned with the authorities and organizations; it is something we have learned to live with. We have a good business there even though it is shrinking because of the economic situation.

Having mentioned that Turkey will play a much bigger role in the near future for Bayer, can you explain the company's presence in the country?

As Bayer and its pharmaceutical organization, we have been in Turkey for over six decades, benefiting from the good relationship between Germany and Turkey. This relationship should continue and be strengthened because both countries are learning from each other.

Bayer is a very innovative company that has invested in Turkish talent and ideas. We have a crop science production and development site as well as a strong local manufacturing footprint for pharma products here, producing 40 percent of the products sold in the local market; a testament to our commitment to Turkey.

Besides our headquarters in Istanbul, we currently have eight regional offices in order to serve the whole country adequately.

Last year you presented a localization project to produce a cardiovascular enterprise in the country. What can you tell us about that project?

The localization project followed the Turkish government's strategy to bring/introduce more local production to the country. Headquarters agreed to invest and decided that it made sense for the organization. Since Bayer does not have its own production facility for pharmaceuticals in the country, we are producing and investing through partners which shows our commitment. The initial idea is to supply local demand, but you never know what the future holds. The product in question has a strong market position in many countries that have approached us, asking if it is possible to manufacture it for them as well.

In 2017, Bayer occupied fifth position in terms of sales in the Turkish pharmaceutical market with over USD 280 million. What has been the progress since then?

Bayer Turkey continues to have a strong position in the Turkish market. We were in fifth place as of 2017 but moved to number three a few months ago, reflecting the increasing levels of trust in our products. This shows our strength here. Of course, the pandemic had an impact, but we are getting back on track thanks to our innovative products.

How is Bayer adapting to the change in priorities for the pharmaceutical industry outlined in Vision 2023, where the country is trying to go beyond local manufacturing to bring more clinical trials?

Since Bayer is highly involved with clinical studies with Turkish patients, and collaborating with the institutions involved, we are on board with the idea of including the country in more clinical trials. Today, Turkey is very involved with Bayer's innovative products from the beginning. The understanding in Turkey is very close to Europe's. I believe that the prominence of Turkish key opinion leaders within international advisory boards has boosted the research ecosystem, not to mention the cultural similarities and geographical position. We have more than 55 clinical trials in 267 investigator sites, helping over 2,000 patients.

Bayer's strategy is all about helping patients and Turkey achieve better health. Another important topic for us is e-health and telemedicine, something that the government also has on its agenda. Bayer implemented a couple of pilot programs last year on this topic, specifically on women's health and oncology, two different fields where we can link patients with healthcare professionals. Improving and developing e-health cannot be done overnight because there are plenty of hurdles, but it is important that the industry plays a fair role in developing it.

One of the main hurdles we have to overcome is the question of data privacy and the fact that it is hard for doctors to diagnose at a distance because physical examinations are often needed. That being said the younger generation around the globe does want to have a closer and faster connection to doctors and pharmacies; this will come. For example, in women's health, we have been working for years to help women have healthy and happy babies. There is a common misconception about contraceptives it's thought that it's about reducing the number of babies, but this is not the case; it's helping women and families to have healthier children.

The pharmaceutical industry has a responsibility to help the population, but the government has to provide the necessary framework. Upfront investment is needed yes, but it will save a whole lot more in the long run.

We, as an industry, are trying to do our part. Last year, for example, one of the winners of a program we have been running for six years named Grants4Apps Turkey to select and support startup companies, was a telemedicine company.

And there is the case of BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine which was developed by a Turkish couple. Do you think that would contribute to the innovation journey of Turkey and what role can Bayer play?

Turkish couple have really made a great innovation. The Turkish people have it in their genes to take action and opportunities to create things.

On one side, their work has helped the image of Turkish science, but it has also put a spotlight again on startup companies globally. Bayer already sees startup companies as great opportunities because they can be more agile with their ideas, making them ideal strategic partners.

Let me put it in this way, as well: Bayer has existed for over 150 years, our Aspirin has been around for 120 years, so our heritage is unquestionable but also gives us the responsibility to be, and stay, innovative. We excel at two of the biggest markets, cardiovascular and oncology, and are working on cell and gene therapies. The objective is to introduce our complete portfolio in Turkey because we want to help the population be healthy. Beyond our innovation efforts, our "Health for All, Hunger for None" approach helps us attract the best talent.

How is your objective of introducing Bayer's complete portfolio to the country affected by the pricing system?

All our big brands and products are available in Turkey. Of course, every country has its own difficulties, it is normal. We have to overcome the challenge and turn it into opportunity; there are always ups and downs, but Turkey has a large and educated population and a high-quality healthcare system. Bayer will always play a role, regardless of the pricing system, but it is true that we should find common ground with the government because companies need to have a successful business in order to help patients. Science for a Better Life is our mission.

In 2020, Bayer's annual revenue was negatively impacted by the pandemic and decreased for the first time in many years. How was the Turkish affiliate affected in particular?

The decrease in revenue was negligible, it was something we could easily manage. We had less investment due to the pandemic and the travel restrictions. This year, we are hopeful that we will bounce back.

In order to achieve that, the most important action we can take is not to talk about the brand but rather be a partner for healthcare practitioners, doctors, physicians, pharmacists and patients. It is important to be a partner; let me give an example:

At the beginning of the pandemic, we organized an international webinar with two important Chinese key opinion leaders to explain the situation and actions to take when dealing with the pandemic. We had 8 thousand Turkish doctors and 7 thousand Chinese doctors participating. This was done within the first couple of weeks of the pandemic.

Do you have a final message to our audience regarding Bayer's position on diversity and inclusion?

Bayer is working and investing heavily on diversity, inclusion and sustainability. When I say diversity and inclusion, I do not only mean a male-female ratio, but also gender, geographical origin and generation. Generation is particularly important because I believe that younger people are more capable than we give them credit for; we just have to give them tasks and see the energy they have.

Particularly in Turkey, we have to empower talent because they have proved their capability around the world; within the Bayer organization, Turkey is recognized as a great source of talent.

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