

Myriam Hakim - Regional Nephrology Franchise Head EMEA, Kyowa Kirin



By forging strong partnerships, crafting innovative strategies, and seizing new opportunities, I am confident that we will continue to make more patients smile across the vast and diverse region we serve

12.09.2023

Tags:

[UAE](#), [Kyowa Kirin](#), [GCC](#), [Rare Disease](#), [Strategy](#)

Erstwhile general manager for the GCC countries at Japanese-headquartered rare disease specialist Kyowa Kirin, earlier this year Myriam Hakim was appointed as the firm's regional nephrology franchise head for the entire EMEA region. Here, Hakim discusses some of the key challenges she navigated the GCC grouping through over the past few years, how Kyowa Kirin continued to support the region's rare disease community throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and the evolution of the healthcare ecosystem in the UAE.

What have been the main highlights for Kyowa Kirin in the GCC since we last spoke in 2021?

Since our last meeting, a series of significant events have unfolded, ranging from the ongoing impact of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) to notable changes within the healthcare system. Nonetheless, Kyowa Kirin remains steadfast in its dedication to the GCC region, exemplified by our representative office in Dubai. Over time, our presence has grown stronger in the area, and our commitment to bringing smiles to the faces of more people here has only intensified.

Although our Dubai office has only been operational for four years, its impact has been remarkable, particularly in the fields of rare diseases and oncology. We continuously strive to add value and make a positive difference in the lives of individuals living with rare diseases and cancer. Our focus

lies in supporting healthcare practitioners (HCPs) through educational initiatives and collaborations with medical societies, all geared towards improving the quality of life for people affected by these conditions.

When you look back on the last few years, what were some of the biggest challenges you faced?

The cornerstone of a successful company lies in having the right people in place, for without them, the organization cannot thrive. At Kyowa Kirin, a Japan-based global pharmaceutical company committed to bringing smiles to people's faces, we seek out individuals who are truly passionate about their work. People with whom our purpose resonates, and who are driven to deliver our mission are the ones we value the most.

Cultural fit is of paramount importance for us, particularly as a medium-sized company in the GCC region. We aim to create a diverse workforce, embracing talent from various parts of the world while ensuring equity within the team. We take pride in our balanced male and female representation, as we collectively build the company's reputation through valuable and life-changing services for patients and healthcare providers.

Despite being a modest-sized presence in the Middle East, we have earned a reputation for supporting the healthcare community in delivering more accurate diagnoses of rare disease. Our primary purpose is to bring smiles to patients facing difficult journeys, offering life-changing treatments. This aligns with Kyowa Kirin's global mission.

Personally, I take great pride in being part of this organization, wholeheartedly dedicated to our purpose. I believe it is crucial for every individual within our company to understand how their work impacts the lives of others, especially in the pharma industry and rare disease context. Without a clear sense of purpose and the view of the positive impact we make, passion can wane, leading to diminished results.

When setting up any operation, it is essential to have a cohesive team focused on a shared purpose. Every person plays a crucial role. We must synchronize efforts across all functions, from commercial, medical, access, finance, supply chain, account management, pharmacovigilance (PV), compliance and quality, to ensure our products reach patients across their journey seamlessly. Only through teamwork or *Wa* (a Japanese cultural concept usually translated as "harmony"), can we make people smile.

Given the high level of competition for talent in the UAE and the regional and global presence of many larger companies, what value proposition is Kyowa Kirin able to offer to attract and retain talent?

To attract and retain top talent, Kyowa Kirin offers a compelling value proposition that sets it apart in the market:

Purpose-driven Culture: Kyowa Kirin's clear and meaningful purpose of making people smile through life-changing treatments and services resonates with individuals seeking to make a positive impact on patients' lives. Being part of a company with a strong sense of purpose can be a motivating factor for talent looking for more than just a job.

Focus on Rare Diseases and Oncology: This focus can attract individuals passionate about making a difference in healthcare and contributing to advancements in these specialized fields.

Employee Development and Growth: Kyowa Kirin is committed to nurturing its employees' skills and capabilities through ongoing training, development programs, and opportunities for career growth.

Inclusive and Diverse Workforce: Kyowa Kirin fosters an inclusive and diverse work environment, where individuals from different backgrounds and cultures can thrive.

Kyowa Kirin aims to attract and retain top talent, even in the face of stiff competition from larger companies in the UAE and beyond. The company's dedication to its mission, employee development, and fostering a positive work environment can serve as key differentiators to appeal to individuals looking for a fulfilling and impactful career journey.

You have previously referred to the challenges of a lack of national programs for rare diseases. Do you see this changing?

The landscape of rare diseases in the UAE is gradually evolving, with notable progress in highlighting specific aspects through targeted initiatives and the increasing presence of rare disease societies. While a comprehensive national program may not yet be fully established, we have observed the emergence of focused efforts to address the issue.

As we strategically navigate this evolving landscape, Kyowa Kirin in GCC acknowledges the importance of actively participating in and supporting these initiatives. By engaging with rare disease societies and contributing to disease education efforts, we can further amplify our commitment to making a positive impact on patients' lives and further promoting healthcare advancements in rare diseases.

Our commitment to improving the lives of patients with rare diseases remains unwavering, and we are determined to play a pivotal role in the positive transformation of the rare disease landscape in the region.

Do you see this change happening from a bottom-up or top-down perspective?

The transformation in addressing rare diseases does not seem to be coming solely from either a bottom-up or top-down approach; rather, it requires a cultural shift. Overcoming the prevalent stigmas surrounding rare diseases demands courage for individuals to step forward and openly discuss their conditions. While I have observed some progress, further time and encouragement are essential to drive this change effectively.

Notably, this region faces one of the highest prevalence rates of rare diseases per inhabitant. Disease education effectively cannot solely rely on efforts from the pharmaceutical industry, although there is commendable support and education provided for a few lesser-known rare diseases. Instead, a well-organized patient association can play a pivotal role in supporting patients throughout their journey.

The establishment of a patient association can offer a platform for rare disease patients to unite, share experiences, and foster a sense of community. It can empower patients to speak openly about

their conditions, reducing the stigma associated with these diseases. Moreover, such an association can advocate for better healthcare resources, research funding, and policies that specifically meet the unique needs of rare disease patients in the region.

Kyowa Kirin recognizes the significance of this cultural shift and acknowledges the pivotal role a patient association can play. As part of our commitment to making people smile and positively impacting lives, we will actively support and collaborate with patient associations to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for those affected by rare diseases.

Are clinicians getting more accustomed to diagnosing those rare diseases, or is there still work to be done?

The ongoing work to improve healthcare is not limited to the GCC region but extends globally. In the UAE, there are Centers of Excellence where doctors can refer patients if they suspect complex diseases beyond their expertise. Access to information and educational resources has become increasingly accessible, aided by the digital acceleration brought about by events like COVID-19. This digital transformation has enabled companies across various sectors, including healthcare, to reach out more effectively and save time in seeking relevant information. Despite these positive changes, progress is not happening at the pace we desire.

The journey to diagnosis remains arduous for many patients, with rare diseases with an average wait of seven years before obtaining a proper diagnosis. This prolonged uncertainty presents significant challenges and difficulties for individuals, especially those living with rare diseases or caring for anyone with such conditions. The struggle to find the right diagnosis is a crucial aspect, as it determines the subsequent course of treatment or management, especially when dealing with disabilities resulting from the condition.

As Kyowa Kirin, we recognize the critical importance of timely and accurate diagnosis in improving patient outcomes and quality of life. To address this challenge, we are committed to collaborating with healthcare practitioners, patient advocacy groups, and other stakeholders to increase awareness, education, and early detection of rare diseases. Our aim is to support initiatives that expedite the diagnosis process, provide better access to healthcare information, and ultimately improve the lives of patients facing complex and rare conditions.

By leveraging digital advancements and engaging in meaningful partnerships, we aspire to contribute to a more streamlined and efficient healthcare ecosystem, empowering patients with the knowledge and support they need to navigate their medical journeys effectively.

According to the Kyowa Kirin report for 2022, the growth of the EMEA region, to which you report, is up 19.2 percent. Can you talk to us through the current product portfolio in GCC? Have new products been launched?

In 2022, we made significant strides in building and expanding our company's presence across the GCC, marking a promising year for us. At the outset, we laid the foundation for our operations, setting the stage for the progress that followed. Throughout the year, we successfully established a robust presence across the region, reaching out to more healthcare practitioners (HCPs) and providing enhanced support to a larger number of patients. This enabled us to fulfill our goal of bringing smiles to the faces of more patients, both in nephrology and oncology, by facilitating access to transformative treatments and care.

Concurrently, we continued to extend our unwavering support to the UAE facilities, and our dedication to the broader Gulf region remains steadfast.

As we reflect on the accomplishments of 2022, we are energized by the progress we have made and the positive impact we have had on patients' lives. Looking ahead, we are committed to continuing our journey of growth and expansion, bolstering our footprint in the region, and furthering our mission of bringing smiles to more individuals through enhanced healthcare services. By building on these achievements and fostering meaningful collaborations, we aspire to achieve even greater heights in the years to come.

According to the annual report, one of Kyowa Kirin's best performing products was Crysvida. Did you find that to be a product that was more widely accepted in the region?

Crysvida has been marketed in the region since its registration in the UAE in 2019 and in Saudi Arabia in 2021. In 2022, we achieved a significant milestone, as Crysvida became fully registered throughout the entire region, marking a momentous year for the product's availability and accessibility.

In addition to Crysvida, Poteligeo has been registered in Saudi Arabia and recently in the UAE; however, it is yet to be registered in the rest of the GCC. As a result, the substantial growth this year has primarily been driven by Crysvida.

Looking ahead, we are enthusiastic about the potential for our expanding product offerings to contribute significantly to our future growth. As we continue to focus on delivering innovative and impactful treatments to patients in the region, we are confident that our diverse portfolio will enable us to achieve even greater success in the coming years.

How easy is it to bring a product onto the UAE market?

The UAE stands out for its advanced regulatory approval processes, particularly when it comes to innovative products. The country's regulatory authorities demonstrate a strong commitment to expediting the availability of cutting-edge treatments for patients in need. By streamlining the approval procedures, innovative products receive prompt attention, and their dossiers are thoroughly assessed with remarkable efficiency. The UAE's health authority exhibits agility in responding swiftly to healthcare advancements, making it an attractive market for pharmaceutical companies seeking to bring their latest medicines to the region.

Living in a country with access to the latest and most innovative medicines is undoubtedly a significant advantage for the population. This proactive approach to healthcare regulation fosters a favorable environment for medical advancements, supporting improved patient outcomes and elevating the UAE's position in the global pharmaceutical landscape. Such initiatives underscore the UAE's emphasis on progress, innovation, and improved public health, making it a desirable destination for pharmaceutical companies and healthcare providers alike.

How is the pricing of products negotiated? Is competitive pricing a concern in the UAE market, as it is in Europe?

In the global context, the success of any product in the market hinges on the underlying value it brings. The post-COVID-19 landscape has seen healthcare budgets facing numerous constraints. While we recognize the necessity of pricing considerations when introducing a product, it is essential to note that pricing is strictly regulated, and negotiations fall within the purview of the authorities. As a company, we abide by these regulations, and pricing is an integral part of our regulatory submission process.

Behind the pricing structure, there exists a rationale that justifies the value we seek for our products. However, the final decision rests with the authority, which underscores the significance of Health Technology Assessment (HTA) in pricing discussions within the GCC and the UAE. HTA has emerged as a pivotal trend in this context, and we believe it is incumbent upon us, as companies, to focus on this aspect.

By engaging in constructive dialogue and collaboration with the relevant authorities and healthcare stakeholders, we strive to navigate the pricing landscape effectively. We are committed to upholding transparency, adhering to regulations, and working proactively to ensure that the value our products offer aligns with the evolving needs of the healthcare ecosystem. Our dedication to understanding and addressing HTA principles underscores our commitment to advancing healthcare outcomes and serving the interests of patients and healthcare providers alike in the GCC and the UAE.

Are the authorities asking for more data than previously?

The growing awareness of how any pharmaceutical product can bring additional value and cost savings to the healthcare system is substantiated. While progress is ongoing, it is essential for us to proactively contribute more input and data to support HTA processes for reimbursement purposes.

I anticipate that the region will increasingly demand their own metrics and measures for HTA evaluations. Numerous initiatives are already underway to address this need. As we navigate these developments, it is imperative for us to be prepared to collaborate closely with local authorities, providing comprehensive and region-specific data to facilitate well-informed decisions on reimbursement. By actively engaging in this process and advocating for a more unified approach, we can strive to enhance the access and affordability of our product for patients across the region, ultimately contributing to improved healthcare outcomes and increased value for the healthcare system.

After four years, you are departing from your role as Kyowa Kirin's General Manager for the GCC. Can you tell us what you are doing next?

In my new capacity, I am entrusted with overseeing the nephrology franchise for Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, a role that entails devising and implementing strategic initiatives tailored to the region. Additionally, I will be actively involved in managing the life cycle of our product across various stages, presenting an exciting and significant progression in my career.

In my capacity, I will also foster cross-functional collaboration with affiliate countries, promoting effective communication and alignment in our pursuit of shared goals. Moreover, I will closely collaborate with various colleagues to explore opportunities for new geographical expansion and novel avenues for our products. This collaborative effort will involve considerable travel, affording me the opportunity to engage with diverse teams and stakeholders, and further enriching my experience in navigating unique market dynamics.

One remarkable aspect of Kyowa Kirin is its flexible approach, enabling employees to effectively cover a broader region while working from any location. The culture of remote work, reinforced by the experiences during COVID-19, has emerged as a positive and progressive development within the company, offering greater flexibility and work-life balance.

This new role presents an exciting and dynamic path for me, and I am eager to contribute to the success of Kyowa Kirin in the Europe, Middle East, and Africa region. By forging strong partnerships, crafting innovative strategies, and seizing new opportunities, I am confident that we will continue to make more patients smile across the vast and diverse region we serve.

Is there anything you would like to add?

Over the past two decades, I have had the privilege of witnessing the remarkable transformation of Dubai's healthcare industry. Notably, I have observed a substantial evolution in the capabilities and talents of professionals working within the healthcare sector. The region now boasts a pool of highly skilled individuals, capable of leading companies, covering broader geographical areas, leveraging the advancements in technology and enhanced accessibility.

The healthcare landscape in Dubai has been further enriched by the hosting of diverse events and congresses, which have played a pivotal role in fostering a positive trajectory for the industry. These gatherings have facilitated knowledge exchange, networking, and innovation, contributing to the growth and development of healthcare services in the region.

As we move forward, the coming two decades present an exciting outlook for Dubai's healthcare domain, especially with the growing emphasis on digitalization and futuristic healthcare models, such as digital clinics. The advent of technology has brought us closer to realizing such possibilities, and the rapid pace of technological advancements promises a quick turnaround in achieving these goals.

Undoubtedly, the future holds intriguing prospects for Dubai's healthcare landscape, and I am eager to witness the continued progress and the transformative impact of digitalization. As the industry embraces innovative solutions, I believe we are on the brink of a new era that will revolutionize patient care and healthcare delivery, making Dubai a leading global hub for cutting-edge healthcare services and technologies.

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