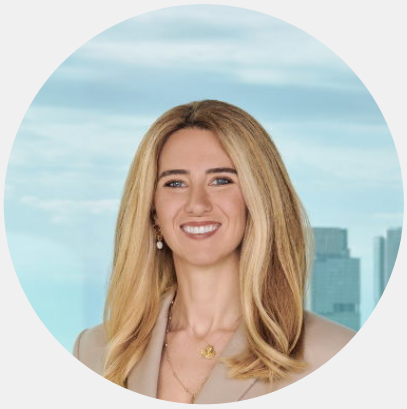
Gözde Güllüoğlu – General Manager Turkey Cluster, MSD



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After being present in the Turkish market for more than 28 years, MSD seems confident that it will be able to seize upcoming opportunities due to the country's high prevalence of chronic disease, strong national immunization program and increasing life expectancy. Its general manager for the Turkey cluster, Gözde Güllüoğlu, comments on the American company's priorities after the Organon spinoff, their leadership position in clinical trials and why her rise within the organization reflects MSD's commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Can you begin by introducing your career in the pharma industry and how you managed to rise through the ranks at one of the largest pharma companies in the world?

I studied business administration and began my career in the pharma industry 16 years ago with Pfizer Turkey. For seven years, I held growing responsibilities in business development, business intelligence and marketing across different therapeutic areas in the Turkish market.

After that, I worked in regional teams as senior marketing director for five years, helping the company grow in Central Eastern Europe, the Baltics, Russia, Turkey, Israel, Western Europe, Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. I was fortunate to acquire experience by working in diverse roles and healthcare systems in both mature and emerging markets.

I joined MSD Turkey in 2018 as business unit director, responsible for immunology, hospital acute care and hepatology. After a year, my role within MSD grew to include the vaccine business. During those years, I represented the Turkish organization in the EMEA region as diversity and inclusion ambassador.

2020 was a transformational year for MSD. I was appointed as managing director for MSD Hungary where I managed the Organon spinoff along with the Covid-19 situation. After one year, I came back to Turkey as managing director for the Turkey cluster which includes eight more countries that, together, have a population of 230 million.

What are the commonalities among the countries in the Turkey Cluster you oversee, which include Ukraine and many CIS countries?

The main thing they have in common is having an emerging economy. They are opportunistic markets; what I mean by that is that you can seize on good opportunities if you are open to them and ready when the opportunity arises.

What is the role that Turkey plays in your country portfolio and what is the mandate given to you by the global organization?

MSD has a clear global vision, especially after the Organon spinoff that took away its women's health, trusted legacy brands and biosimilars businesses. Our main goal is to become the leading R&D-focused biopharmaceutical company in every market we are present; it is the mandate being implemented in all countries. The second objective for MSD Turkey is to continue being a growth engine within the EEMEA region; we are one of the fastest-growing companies, a leader in clinical trials and data-driven solutions.

We, of course, are helped by the fact that MSD has a strong legacy in Turkey, a reputation it has built over many years. At the management team, we are committed to the very talented people working in the organization. That is why diversity and inclusion is a top priority. We are adopting new capabilities, experimenting, bringing data into the decision-making process and empowering people to remain an agile company.

There is plenty of high-quality clinical data that has been amassed through clinical trials and post-marketing studies, however, we are yet to find the most efficient way of implementing it in our

internal deliberations.

Speaking about Turkey, the country is a pioneer in many sectors, not only pharma. You can find plenty of innovation in the technology sector, strong marketplace-type companies, and many new “unicorns”, privately held startup companies valued at over USD 1 billion. The entrepreneurial spirit present in the young population is often overlooked.

The best performing therapeutic areas for our organization are cancer, vaccines, hospital acute care, infectious diseases, HIV, diabetes and immunology. Our animal health division has also been performing well although it is separate from the human health division.

I perceive our role as operating responsibly and with the highest ethical standards when interacting with patients, distributors and suppliers.

We are helping patients obtain access to innovative therapies and vaccines from the start, from the clinical development stage. As I mentioned, MSD Turkey is the leader in clinical trials, helping patients benefit from early access to innovation, particularly in oncology. We are successfully collaborating with centres in the country’s main hospitals.

Can you elaborate on MSD’s leadership in clinical trials?

Driven by our steadfast commitment to our patients, we are making every effort to ensure that patients who are enrolled in clinical trials are able to continue their treatment and receive appropriate care and monitoring. There are approximately 90 active studies with more than 2,500 patients in 63 unique sites. As MSD Turkey, we are one of the pharmaceutical companies that invests in R&D the most with an investment share of approximately 40 percent in 2020 in our country. In line with Turkey’s goal of being among the top 10 economies in the world, we aim to be one of the top 10 countries in clinical research area.

One concern we have heard from executives in some Middle Eastern countries is the need to improve intellectual property (IP) protections. Is that the case in Turkey?

I believe IP is very well regulated in Turkey; the regulations comply with global standards.

As a leading company in the vaccines market, what can you tell our audience about the status of immunization efforts in Turkey, excluding the Covid-19 vaccines since MSD is not active in that segment at the moment?

Turkey has a very comprehensive national immunization program which has been in place since 2013-14. The program, called NIP, is very mature and well-organized.

MSD is present with both pediatric and adult vaccine, including its pneumococcal and Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccines. Looking at pediatric vaccinations, for example, the vaccine coverage rates oscillate between 98-99 percent.

How do you evaluate the opportunities present in the Turkish market and what is MSD's strategy to capitalize on them?

Turkey's pharmaceutical market is within the top 20 and it is expected to climb in the rankings due to the high prevalence of chronic diseases, better diagnosis, and higher life expectancy. It has become evident during the pandemic that Turkey has a well-established and capable healthcare system with experienced healthcare professionals (HCPs). Considering all these aspects, double-digit growth in the market is to be expected.

At the same time, the circumstances pose sustainability challenges. At MSD, we believe that we can increase investment with a sustainable pricing system and better access to innovation. Patients, HCPs and researchers benefit the most to early access to innovative therapies and vaccines.

The top priority for the industry should be to continue investing in Turkey's potential. It is not only about pricing, but also about searching for ways to achieve sustainability of every part of the system and market. Pricing, reimbursement, and regulations can be improved, just as in all other countries, but the question should be about guaranteeing the continued success of the healthcare system for generations to come. Quality investments demand adequate conditions.

Moving to diversity and inclusion, almost all Big Pharma affiliates have stated their full commitment but it is sometimes difficult to see tangible results. Can you comment on your experience after representing the Turkish organization in the EMEA region as diversity and inclusion ambassador?

I do believe I am a great example of the company's commitment to provide opportunities for capable and committed people, regardless of their background, age, beliefs or gender. I became managing director as a 37-year-old Muslim Turkish woman. The best part is that my story is not necessarily unique, you can find plenty of examples in MSD across all countries and regions.

We see different genders, generations, religions, linguistic differences, and racial differences as assets, not a burden. The company is making an effort to implement projects that touch people's hearts, where they can self-discover and feel that they can contribute.

That is the overall mindset in MSD, but there is also a well-structured system in place to promote programs that help us be more inclusive and diverse. For women, just to give an example, we have global programs such as the Woman Network Academy and other woman leadership programs where we send members of the Turkish organization. At a local level, we have been running the Empowered Woman program in partnership with a Turkish university. This year, six of our female managers provided mentorship and training to six students.

From a management perspective, how did you approach the challenge of having to coordinate the Turkish organization to secure the continued supply of medicines with the challenges of remote working on a steady environment?

There were a couple of big challenges brought on by the pandemic. Some of our colleagues were alone, others had to take care of their children at the same time they were working, but all proved their resilience during the pandemic. To help them, we tried to be very flexible and supportive when it came to working from home and health challenges. Our talent development and promotion programs were not interrupted. Since the programs include mentorship, coaching and networking elements, we increased our support for them; they were perhaps needed more than ever.

How did MSD and its Turkish organization respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unrivalled scientific and global health challenge and demands collaboration from across the scientific community. As a company with a long legacy of research in infectious disease, we know we have a responsibility to mobilize our scientific expertise and experience to help address the pandemic. One of the most important announcements MSD made in our scientific efforts to combat COVID-19 was our partnership with Ridgeback Bio to develop a novel, oral antiviral candidate. A few days ago, we announced interim data for our investigational

COVID19 antiviral treatment. MSD, we TRY 4.500.000 in total as cash donation valued at TRY 3.350.000 and 28.800 doses of pneumococcal vaccine to the Republic of Turkey Ministry of Health, General Directorate of Public Health to support the successful works by the Ministry in its fight against COVID-19 pandemic.

MSD has a clear global and local agenda but what are your personal expectations for 2021 and 2022?

Turkey’s pharmaceutical industry has all the necessary infrastructure and conditions for sustainable development. The government’s Vision 2023 set a clear target for the industry and MSD can contribute with its focus on R&D, novel therapies and vaccines. We are moving in the right direction.

MSD has been present in the Turkish market for 28 years and, in those nearly three decades, we have achieved many firsts and will continue to do so.

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