INC Research – Alan Ong, Executive Vice President, Asia/Pacific – Malaysia



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Alan Ong, executive vice president for the Asia/Pacific region at INC Research, outlines the key challenges and opportunities that CROs face in the Malaysian clinical trial segment and describes INC's role in raising the country's profile as a destination for research.

You represented another global CRO for almost 13 years in Singapore. What led you to join INC Research and what are your impressions so far?

As a CRO, INC Research represents the best of both worlds. It started as a niche CRO with CNS roots, and over time developed expertise in broader therapeutic areas, from CNS to oncology, general medicine, cardiovascular, and endocrinology. This scientific expertise is something that we are very proud of here at INC Research because it extends throughout the entire organisation, which distinguishes the company from other CROs and makes it unique in the industry.

INC also prides itself in its methodology, which we refer to as our "Trusted Process®." The process incorporates a lot of learning in terms of understanding how to make project delivery more predictable and consistent. At INC, for a number of years now, we have engaged in this process that is unique to the industry. Since I joined, I have received various executive summaries and updates from INC Research Project Directors that provide assessments of how efficiently the studies are running. This definitely improves reliability and demonstrates our ability to deliver

studies on time and on budget. INC Research is a Company with a great future and I wanted to be a part of it.

Being responsible for the Asia/Pacific area, you must have a very clear understanding of the differences between countries in this region. What key opportunities and challenges do you predict will be different here in Malaysia compared to those you have faced in the past?

INC has grown significantly in the Asia/Pacific region both through organic as well as inorganic means including acquisitions of MDS in 2009 and Kendle and Trident in Australia both in 2011. Although we've previously leveraged our strengths in Australia and other parts of the region, we are looking to extend our success story into Malaysia as well. I am currently based in Singapore, which has become the Asian headquarters for the region, but Malaysia is very close by, with a similar culture, tradition, and shared history, and both have great infrastructure. So focusing on Malaysia is a natural extension of our development within the region.

Whilst the vast growth potential for clinical trials in Malaysia is very clear, the country is in need of additional talented professionals to conduct clinical research. Malaysia, like most areas where clinical development is on the rise, is in need of an influx of investigators, monitors and other research professionals. It is important to open up the doors to more talent, encourage universities to motivate younger generations and increase awareness amongst both pharmacy and medical students. Malaysia as a market for clinical trials is not very well known and often finds itself competing against China, Japan or South Korea, which are destinations that are always considered when global trials are taking place in the region.

To develop into a strong hub, Malaysia also needs to have a significant pharmaceutical presence. Competing destinations like China for example have long been very attractive to pharma largely because of its size and potential. Compared to Southeast Asian countries with significant populations such as Vietnam or the Philippines, I believe Malaysia has a growing pharmaceutical presence and that growth will be somewhat tied to the economic progress that Malaysia makes.

How will the acquisitions INC Research has made reflect in the region and what are the steps the company is taking in order to add an empirical touch to these transactions?

In terms of strategy, we are focusing on how dynamic the region is both within our Company and to our customers. We believe that we can play a bigger role here. We have looked at the markets in Asia/Pacific and we see opportunities in a number of countries. Within Southeast Asia for example, the percentage of the outsourced market is relatively high compared to Japan, where it is relatively

low. We believe this means there is an opportunity because the pharmaceutical industry in general will tend to outsource more. In Malaysia, INC Research will position itself to take advantage of the strong clinical trials infrastructure present here. Marketing also will certainly play a key part in terms of promoting Malaysia. There are some great sites like the University Malaya Medical Center, which has been considered a great institution even during my time in previous companies. It has good infrastructure, good research centers with experience, well-trained investigators, and investigators that have familiarity with the English language. All of these factors allow clinical trials to be executed to global standards.

Healthcare institutions worldwide often look at clinical trials with suspicion. What is the perception towards clinical trials amongst the different stakeholders here in Malaysia?

The Malaysian government is incredibly supportive of clinical trials. In fact, their objective is to reach 1,000 trials by 2020. Right now I'd estimate Malaysia hosts approximately 200 trials, therefore quintupling the number within the next six years is the goal.

Communicating the advantages of Malaysia to customers is key. Great institutions are present here in Malaysia and we need to market the capabilities of the country to customers in the U.S., Europe and globally, and showcase the attractiveness of Malaysia for conducting clinical trials in all phases. We will seek to conduct more trials, particularly in Phase II, III and IV, with the regional infrastructure that we have developed spanning Asia/Pacific.

Our priority is to build credibility and demonstrate INC Research delivery across the region. This will inevitably translate to better marketability. Decisions on where to place clinical trials are often made by global project managers and the competition in Southeast Asia is always very intense. Therefore it is important to highlight more reasons for companies to choose Malaysia over other countries. What Malaysia has to offer should be made clearer. From my perspective, the advantages of conducting clinical trials in Malaysia, besides the great encouragement from the government, are the timelines. Malaysia has one of the fastest timelines for trials and has very strong institutions across a broad spectrum of disease areas, which is extremely promising.

You mentioned that marketing will play a key part in rolling out the strategic plans. What type of initiatives are you expecting to pursue?

Our plan is to highlight expertise and relationships with institutions that can deliver trials, as well as to leverage strong site relationships. When a country is selected for clinical research, it is important to consider the key opinion leaders present in the area and our relationships with them. Building and maintaining these relationships is critically important.

How do you think the Malaysian government could encourage more high-quality trials in Malaysia?

Malaysia is in critical need of more trained investigators. Over the past few years, the country has seen a decrease in number of investigators and the capacity to do clinical trials has therefore become somewhat saturated. It is time for the government to play a bigger role in improving the situation by opening up clinical trials in Malaysia to hospitals and exposing the healthcare system as a whole. This will create a greater interest in clinical trials and increase the number of participants, and will align with the government's goal of having 1,000 clinical trials by 2020.

Malaysia will never be an exceptionally huge market because of the constraints in population size. In terms of positioning, what role should the nation aspire to take?

When comparing the Malaysian population to that of Indonesia, for example, the difference in size is quite significant. However, a country's overall population may not be as important as the percentage of people with access to healthcare. In Malaysia, a great majority of the country's 30 million people have access to quality healthcare. Looking at successful countries with small population sizes, Singapore can be a great inspiration. Despite the small population, Singapore has been a key hub for clinical trials due to its highly respected key opinion leaders. As many of these leaders retired and were not replaced, there has been a bit of a decline in trials in Singapore. From this, we can see the importance of having respected investigators with standing and the need for Malaysia to develop thought leaders if it wishes to be a regional clinical trials hub.

Do you see a correlation between the presence of CRO activities of companies and the level of innovation in the healthcare sector?

The correlation between CRO activities and innovation in healthcare is very strong as CROs provide a more productive and efficient way to conduct clinical trials thereby freeing up companies to focus more on innovation. Encouraging more CRO and clinical development activity would be interesting for Malaysia as it has the potential to become an important incubator for new drug development. This is something that it has started in some areas already, so if tackled more aggressively, Malaysia could rival that of the other "Asian Tigers" (Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea).

You joined INC Research very recently but the Company's reputation for change and success are clearly well established. What collaborations will you push to establish in the future and which corporations would you be keen to have on board?

We will focus on more collaboration with local institutions here in Malaysia, especially with hospital sites. One of the key focus areas for INC Research is to develop relationships with hospitals and clinics to get them involved in pursuing clinical trials. We will continue to improve upon our strengths in the region and build relationships with key opinion leaders. The vision for INC Research in Malaysia is to build very strong and solid relationships with institutions and work directly with highly regarded authorities while we also market ourselves aggressively. This is the case not only for INC Research but also for Malaysia as a destination for clinical trials.

INC Research is keen to grow its presence in the Asia/Pacific region. We have a solid base in Malaysia and will take an active role in continuing its development. Being Malaysian born, I will always keep Malaysia in my heart, and I am optimistic about seeing the country succeed in its clinical trials initiative with INC Research as a leading protagonist.

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