# John Moller – CEO & Yooni Kim – Executive Director of Asia Operations, Novotech



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23.10.2019

Tags: China, CRO, Novotech, Research

*John Moller, CEO; and Yooni Kim, executive director of Asia operations, for Novotech, share the competitive positioning of Novotech as a full-service CRO for biotech companies interested in the Asia-Pacific region; the solutions and services they offer, including their clinical development consultancy, 'BioDesk'; as well as the exciting opportunities they see within China's booming biotech market.*

**John, Yooni, Novotech had the honor to be named 'Asia Pacific Biotech CRO of the Year' this year by Frost & Sullivan. What has contributed to this award from your perspectives?**

The core reason is that we are really focused on what we do: serving biotech clients within Asia-Pacific. In terms of our systems, processes, organization and operations, we are highly specialized in our offerings. At the same time, we are a full-service CRO, which means we offer the full portfolio of services to our biotech clients, from feasibility studies, regulatory monitoring, project management, medical services, pharmacovigilance and more.

We also offer a valuable service called 'BioDesk', a clinical development consultancy. Through this function, we can address some of the many questions that biotechs often have, whether they are on medical writing, regulatory pathways, toxicology, manufacturing or other aspects. This allows

them to access solutions and answers quickly and seamlessly inside our company without having to go through the silos present in larger CROs.

Within Asia-Pacific, we are physically present in 11 locations, which allows us to be exceptional in terms of service delivery. We also partner with like-minded CROs from other global regions to run global clinical trials. This way biotechs get the advantage of regional clinical specialists with deep local knowledge.

**How have you seen the needs of your clients evolve over the past few years?**

I would say that the therapies our clients are working on are becoming more and more complex, which can be seen most clearly from the rise of immuno-oncology and CAR-T therapies. As a result, the design of clinical trials has become increasingly more complex, the turnaround times our sponsors require are decreasing because market competition has intensified, and overall, we need to be even more responsive to their needs. With precision medicine becoming a larger focus, patient recruitment is also more complex because they require specific patient subsets.

Overall, the quality of clinical research in Asia is very good. At the moment, around 75 percent of our clients still come from the US. They are attracted to Asia because of the enormous patient population, going beyond just the 1.4 billion people you have in China alone, as well as certain therapeutic areas of particular interest in Asia, such as some types of cancer and infectious diseases. In many cases, there are also cost advantages. US biotechs are particularly interested in having a CRO that is across the local and in-country regulatory requirements.

At the same time, we have seen huge growth in the numbers of clients from Asia. These are extremely sophisticated biotech companies coming from countries like China and South Korea. Some of them are very well-funded and so they have started to take more strategic perspectives on the potential commercial implications of where their clinical research is conducted.

**Coming to China now, as CEO of Novotech, John, how do you see the strategic significance of the China market as compared to the other markets in the region?**

China is naturally a very important market but so are the other markets, and all offer different benefits both in terms of clinical trials and commercial attributes. The growth rates in different locations, the regulatory environment and so on – all vary from country to country within the

region. We are currently investing heavily in China but not to the detriment of other markets.

China is a very exciting market and we are expanding rapidly here. We are looking to hire new people in business development, clinical operations, project managers and so on. From a business development perspective, we spend a lot of time with people on the ground to better understand their needs both within and outside China and to provide them with global solutions.

**The Chinese biotech scene has changed dramatically in the past few years. What do you make of it now?**

The Chinese government has a strong focus on increasing the overall level of innovation within the country, and there have always been some fantastic academic institutions working on world-leading science. One of the main things we have noticed about Chinese biotechs is that they are very keen to move globally quickly. Most, if not all, of them have ambitions to become global forces in terms of innovation so many of them have also opted to develop extremely broad pipelines. They usually want to work on multiple drugs in their pipelines simultaneously to accelerate their overall clinical development.

Of course, there is a wide range of biotechs in China so their characteristics are also quite diverse. Some are incredibly well-funded with access to a huge amount of capital. They are usually very well-developed and already have some global presence. For them, we just need to deliver our solutions to best support the delivery of their global clinical development strategy.

The other group comprises quite young, very early-stage, typically pre-clinical, biotechs. Even if they are working on extremely innovative assets, they may lack the necessary knowhow or confidence to conduct trials outside of China, so our consulting capabilities and tailored services really benefit these types of biotechs.

We are already working with many Chinese biotechs, including four of the top ten most innovative ones. The Chinese biotechs do understand our value proposition. They like our unique ability to deliver clinical trials within the region, and in particular, they appreciate the advantages of working with a mid-sized CRO that can bring them closer to local markets in terms of relationships with regulators, investigators and sites. We are excited to have received very positive feedback from our Chinese clients so far.

**China is known to be a very cost-competitive market, and more and more CROs are emerging to take advantage of the biotech boom. How does Novotech manage the price pressures?**

Novotech has never been a company that competes on price alone. We are a high-quality CRO delivering high-quality service. Our clients benefit from our state-of-the-art systems and processes, our extensive expertise and experience, as well as our comprehensive set of locations across the region. For sponsors that are extremely price-sensitive, we are probably not the right CRO for them. At the same time, we place a lot of emphasis on work efficiency, flexibility and adaptability – to truly meet the needs of our clients in the best and most productive ways. That is a better way of competing.

**At the moment, most of the Chinese biotechs we have spoken to are focused on clinical development in China and the US. How do you think they can leverage more on the clinical infrastructure in Asia-Pacific?**

We are seeing more clients begin to understand that Asia-Pacific has significant advantages as a clinical research destination, including increasing commercial potential. In addition to higher purchasing power in some of the more developed countries, many countries in the region also have a well-established clinical research history and experience. South Korea, for instance, is a great example, with around 30 years of clinical research expertise. Many Chinese sponsors are already conducting early stage trials in Australia and New Zealand due to the beneficial ecosystem there including the R&D rebate.

I think the countries in the region could learn from and collaborate with each other more. More advanced locations – like South Korea and Hong Kong – could act as a gateway for Chinese biotechs, who can leverage them as a regional platform to international drug development. These could support them in bringing innovative products more safely and securely to global markets.

**As you are growing your China operations, what is the story of Novotech you are telling potential job candidates to attract them to join Novotech?**

So far, our candidates in China as well as Asia have been very attracted to the Novotech story. They like our focus on and commitment to Asia-Pacific, because this offers them significant job development and growth. They have opportunities to rise to senior positions – in fact, we are

increasingly distributing our executive committee positions across the region. Comparatively, they would be able to progress faster than in global CROs

Due to this focus and specialization, we are also growing faster than our competitors in the region.

**What are some new areas or opportunities you would like to develop for Novotech?**

As mentioned, we are very comfortable with our current Asia-Pacific footprint. But we are continuing to invest in some of the most advanced and specialized services our clients require. For instance, many companies are now looking at new digital platforms to use in clinical trials, ultimately to generate more positive clinical trial outcomes. There are some new and interesting options to consider, such as the use of the artificial intelligence (AI), remote monitoring, use of wearables, and so on, but many are still in their infancy. The regulatory frameworks for the use of such digital technology are also still being developed and formulated across many Asia-Pacific markets, so we also have to wait to see which could be applicable for our clients.

One of the challenges we face in this area is that hospitals are often slow adopters of digital technology. There are good reasons for that, for instance, privacy concerns, cultural barriers, as well as siloed technology systems and processes. Ultimately, we work in a rather complex and often fragmented environment, so digital adoption has been slower than some would have liked to see. Nevertheless, we will continue to invest in this area as needed to support our work and better serve our clients.

**Yooni, as executive director of Asia operations, what is your top priority moving forward?**

I have developed my career on the operations side, so I am very interested in the quality of service delivery. Asia is now a hot topic within the global industry, and we are at the epicentre of that directional change and momentum, so with the rise in the number of global projects based in Asia, operational quality is even more important. If our clients are happy with our service quality in Asia, I would be very proud.

**To begin wrapping up, John, having worked in different parts of the healthcare industry, what have been your greatest takeaway?**

I am a medical doctor by training, who then worked as a management consultant before joining the IVF sector for many years, and of course, Novotech, for nearly six years now. The common thread across these sectors is that they are all service businesses, people businesses. Therefore, I am a big believer that you get the most out of people when you provide them with exceptional opportunities. This means a non-hierarchical approach where everyone can bring their ideas to the table, where everyone is valued, and where everyone has access to senior leadership and growth opportunities. This is the best way to unlock the potential of your talented employees within the service business. When your employees are valued, motivated and encouraged, then good things will follow for your business.

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