

Interview: Alan Ong Executive Vice President of Asia Pacific and Global Head of Medical Devices and Diagnostics, INC Research, Singapore



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In an exclusive interview with Alan Ong, Executive Vice President of Asia Pacific and Global Head of Medical Devices and Diagnostics at INC Research, he highlights the current trends facing CROs in the region and the increasing capabilities and footprint of INC Research in Singapore.

As the Executive Vice President of Asia Pacific for INC Research and overseeing 12 countries throughout the region, could you provide us with the scope of your role as well as your priorities throughout the region?

I joined INC Research about two and half years ago as the Executive Vice President for Asia Pacific. At that time we were strong in Australia and China and a few other key countries with a smaller presence across the region. Since then we have grown tremendously. In terms of scope, from the beginning my role has been to oversee the growth of INC Research in the APAC region across all of our business units. Starting in January of this year I have taken on an additional portfolio to manage and I am now also the Global Head for the Medical Device and Diagnostics Division. In this role I am developing the Medical Device and Diagnostic Division as a new value stream so as to add additional revenues to INC Research in the future. Medical Devices had previously been run as part of a broader global business unit but has now been elevated to an area of focus under my direction. The United States is still the largest region for MedTech CROs; however, we see that Asia Pacific is

growing and expected to surpass Western Europe in the next several years. With Japan, China, and South Korea as major players in the field, it makes sense for me to be in Singapore in order to drive this new business unit. My priorities and time are divided into managing APAC as a region and the Global Medical Device and Diagnostics Portfolio.

In terms of your services for clinical research and managing clinical studies, could you elaborate on your footprint in Singapore?

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We have almost tripled our headcount in the past two years in Singapore, and nearly all of our functions are represented in our offices here. We are committed to growing in Singapore and in growing this office with the necessary business leaders, functional leaders, project managers and clinical managers for a successful regional hub.

What are the areas where INC Research can add the most value for pharmaceutical and MedTech clinical development processes?

INC Research operates differently from most CROs due to the range of our therapeutic expertise. We also have dedicated business units for medical devices, late phase, and consulting that add significant value. Our dedicated global business units within the region provide expertise in a given therapeutic area, whether it is from the project manager or the subject matter experts in the clinical development team. That is a strong differentiator for INC Research. As the Global Head of Medical Devices, I have taken the same approach to crafting our differentiation for the MedTech customers. At INC Research, we provide therapeutic expertise throughout the entire value stream.

How does this approach differ from other CROs?

The approach that INC Research has taken in comparison to other CROs is different because of our therapeutic expertise and how we have built up this expertise within the region. Although most CROs will have some type of therapeutic knowledge in terms of clinical development, for the most part that expertise tends to be clustered where the headquarters are located in the United States or Europe. We have created that expertise in the region. INC Research has taken this even a step further by building expertise at the country level as well. This means that we have built full-service capabilities throughout the entire clinical research development process within individual countries. Japan is an example where we have every function necessary for clinical trials without having to rely on experts in another region or even another country – this includes everything from CRAs, project managers, medical writers, safety controllers, bio statisticians, programmers, finance, HR and vendor management. We currently have these capabilities in our major markets and over time we are developing these capabilities throughout Southeast Asia as well. We believe that having “boots on the ground” in a country is preferred by many local decision makers. They are looking for a company that has the capability to act locally with the global standards and know-how.

What do you identify as the most pervasive challenges currently impacting CROs in the region?

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Right now we are seeing consolidation not just in the pharmaceutical and MedTech industry, but also in the CRO industry. At the same time the industry itself is growing tremendously due to the increase of Research & Development and the increase in outsourcing. There are many competitors in the field attempting to capture the growing market and this presents the challenge of differentiating from the local, regional and multinational CROs. All the CROs are honing their value proposition to find

the area in which they differentiate themselves and stand out in the market. In our case we differentiate ourselves on our therapeutic expertise and our delivery.

Many large pharmaceutical companies have taken more strategic relationships with their CROs. In the past these were very tactical relationships, which resulted in working with multiple CROs. Now, large pharmaceutical companies prefer to work with a limited number of larger CRO on a partnership level across a variety of areas. This presents the challenge for CROs to find their place in this new equation.

What is your outlook on the rising opportunities that the industry can derive from Asia Pacific in particular?

Like most CROs, we see the enormous potential of Asia due to the population size and the growing developments within the region. We see that this region's contribution to the overall revenue of INC Research is only increasing and we expect this to continue and grow. We are experiencing double digit growth and there is more potential. A number of years ago the attraction to Asia Pacific was access to this large population at a lower pricing point, with Japan as an exception. Now we also are seeing the increase of Biotech in the region. We are starting to see an increasing number of Biotech companies from Korea, China, and Taiwan, and they are developing their pipelines. We did not see this just five years ago, and for INC Research, it has been a great opportunity to grow and develop with the industry.

In this rapidly developing industry, how are your customers' needs and expectations developing in regards to technology?

We see an increase in expectations for tools whether it is a request for Patient Diaries, or increasing interest in wearable monitoring devices. These tools are becoming part of the norm and have impacted the way we do trials. We also have risk monitoring and risk-based methodologies, and within INC we have our Strategic Data Management, which allows us to take a data-driven approach to monitoring. Everyone is trying to be smarter in how we look at data in order to do trials more efficiently. When we look at other CROs, some of them have tried to build their own technology platforms. INC Research has taken a different approach by seamlessly integrating existing platforms such as Medidata and goBalto into our own platform.

For pharmaceutical companies, the intellectual property that is invested in and developed is the molecule. For CROs, the intellectual property investments are focused on operational capabilities as well as investigator and patient access. What differentiates INC Research in these areas?

Aside from our therapeutic expertise, we are very strong with our site relationships. We have launched our Catalyst Site Network that is linked through portals where we are able to communicate with the sites more broadly and where they have access to more information. We do not own our own diagnostic sites in the way that some other CROs are beginning to do. We avoid owning the sites so we remain neutral in our search for the best sites for all of our sponsors. INC was named the "Top CRO to Work With" among large global CROs in the last CenterWatch Global Investigative Site Relationship survey. The Company also was the top-rated overall CRO in the previous survey, and the only CRO to rank among the top three CROs in every version of the survey since 2007.

The third aspect that differentiates us is our technology and our Trusted Process. The Trusted Process is the brand name for our metrics-driven project management process. We have implemented this process and this culture throughout all of our projects. This process is about proactive planning and strong delivery. The Holy Grail for all CROs is to deliver reliability and

consistency to the sponsors, and I believe that at INC Research we have achieved that. We have separate facilitators that guide the use of the process and ensure that the proper documents and processes are being used. The variance from one project to another is now very narrow following the implementation of the Trusted Process in 2006.

Looking to the future, what are your objectives and vision for 2020?

Our stated goal is to make INC Research the “CRO of Choice” for all stakeholders: employees, customers, sites and investors. By focusing on all of these stakeholders, we are confident that we will continue to grow globally as well as across the Asia Pacific region while maintaining our close culture of working intimately with our customers. This is part of our Trusted Process and a part of the corporate culture. We enjoy working on teams and working with our partners. It is our objective to maintain this culture as we grow. With this in mind, we believe our future is very bright!

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