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Petr VaculÃk, country manager of PSI CRO, a privately owned Swiss clinical research organization (CRO), describes how the number of clinical trials is decreasing in the Czech Republic, although many continue to capitalize on the countryâ??s universal healthcare system. VaculÃk also shares his views on how to retain a strong workforce, how key stakeholders are coming together to help shape the research landscape for the better.

Petr, when you first took over as GM what were the key priorities you put in place to build up the local affiliate?

PSI CRO has held an office in the Czech Republic since 2008 when we were a small team of no more than seven employees.

Our focus has always been on conducting highly competitive clinical trials, namely in the areas of oncology and haematology. Since these areas require a CRO with high-quality skills, it was important to build up our reputation, and build up our staff. Currently, we have roughly 40 employees in the region.

In the past three years specifically, we have established a strong reputation in the country. Building our team in the region while maintaining our focus of delivering trials on-time and on-budget was and

continues to be the key priority that we circle back to time and time again.

What is the overall footprint of PSI in the Czech Republic?

We are private, mid-sized, full-service CRO. Currently, we are working on roughly 30 projects in this region specifically. These studies focus mainly in the areas of oncology, hemato-oncology, and haematology.

Globally, we put a lot of weight behind the sites and clinics that we work with to run trials. This remains true for the Czech Republic as well. We care about our partners. As it says in our mission statement: we are dedicated to being the best CRO in the world as measured by our sites, sponsors, employees, and vendors. As such, we have been particularly successful in on-time enrollment by working with those sites.

How do you continue to support the doctors and clinics when conducting clinical trials?

At PSI, we have a close collaboration with key opinion leaders, investigators and study doctors at the sites that we work with. Since the patient relies on their doctor, our strategy is to provide as much support as possible and not overload them with unnecessary administrative tasks. Then, they are able to focus on the quality of treatment they give.

Supporting the doctors and clinics is so important to us as a company, thus, each year we hold a â??Site Appreciation Weekâ?• and take time out to ensure we are thanking our sites for all that they do to make studies a success.

How have you seen the evolution of the Czech Republicâ??s clinical landscape?

We are in a period of change, with progression happening rapidly in the past few years. ACRO-CZ, the association dedicated to promoting clinical research in the country and its members, meets frequently to promote the benefits of clinical trials conducted in the country and share our experiences to work together and mutually promote the region.

The main change that we see is the shift in patient populations. Many patients with diabetes and cardiovascular diseases are leaving the country. The Czech Republic can no longer compete with other bigger Eastern countries, such as Ukraine or Russia, or with many smaller countries for trials in infectious diseases. Secondly, the cost to conduct a trial in the Czech Republic has increased and is now comparable to South-Western European countries.

However, the main advantages are that we are highly competitive in terms of patient recruitment. We have some of the highest numbers of patients in clinical trials per total number of patients in the CEE Region. Also, we have a Universal Healthcare System, so treatment is available to all patients in the country. This could be why more complicated trials are being conducted in the country. Although the Czech Republic needs to catch up to the West, we have state of the art equipment, hospitals, and doctors already in place. Even with the changes and evolutions, a large potential still presents itself in this region.

How would you assess the Czech Republicâ??s ability to â??Close the Gapâ?• on Western Europe?

We still have very good potential, but urgently need help from government authorities, particularly the MOH, when it comes to organizing contractual processes. All stakeholders need to come together to make the contractual agreements of conducting clinical trials in the country more effective.

It is important for sponsors to have an incentive to conduct clinical research in the country. This could be achieved by shorter start-up times. Generally, we are quicker than in other countries. Moreover, our quality of data is of high-quality, and this is key, with thanks to our historical medical system.

In a country with one of the lowest unemployment rates in Europe, how do you work to build up a strong team of expertise and know-how in the Czech Republic?

Since PSI CRO was created in Switzerland in 1995, all of our growth has been organic. We build up teams and staff based on need and based on what support we need to provide to our sponsors. We invest in training staff, living out our corporate values, and really acting as one team â?? whether thatâ??s specifically in the Czech Republic, or the global team as a whole.

We certainly do have strong experts. From therapeutic leads and industry leaders to front line staff, we ensure all PSI CRO employees are trained up, involved, and empowered to support trials successfully. As one example, our Clinical Research Associates (CRAs) work with the full scope of knowledge, meaning they are not specialized in any specific therapeutic or business area. They are required to know everything about the whole clinical trial process, which is somewhat of a different approach from other CROs. But, it works. We maintain one of the lowest turnover rates in the industry, and staff tend to stay at PSI for a long time.

It is important to find something different to offer sponsors and clients. PSI can offer an experienced and stable workforce that knows the subject.

Looking forward, what is your future mission and direction for PSI in the country?

We aim to continue supporting and providing more services on a global level. There is huge potential for PSI to continue making an impact in the region and push clinical trials ahead. From a staff perspective, we are ramping up more and more as well. We are growing organically both in this region specifically and globally in order to meet the needs of sponsors, support clinical trials, and both enrol and deliver studies on time.

What keeps you passionate and motivated to continue working at PSI CRO Czech Republic?

PSI CRO is different from other CROs in many ways. We stand by the mantra that â??Every Patient Countsâ?•, and we work to deliver trials on time, every time. We build our teams, our work, and our overall mindset around the values that we hold as a company. And as a privately owned, mid-sized CRO, we have the agility and flexibility to scale and support.

Our work is not easy, but we are a team. Iâ??m passionate about the work that we do, and I believe in our staff and teams that are pushing clinical trials ahead every day. PSI CRO lives out its mission, and weâ??re all proud to know that what weâ??re doing matters.

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