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'We provide services to 14 of the top 20 pharma companies'

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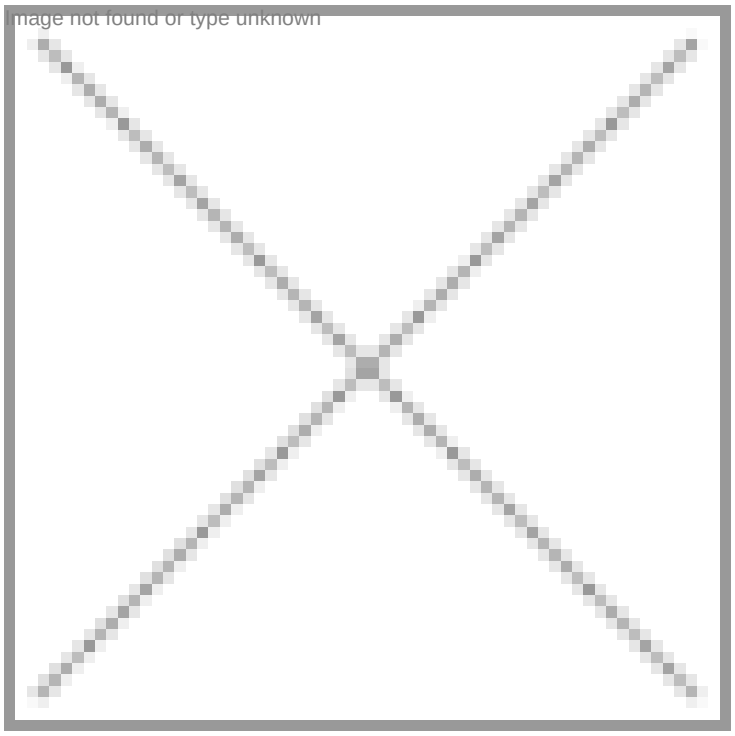

Swapanbhattacharya	**Mr Swapan Bhattacharya,** MD,TCG Life Sciences

Innovative partnership is a key element for CROs to sustain the rapid changes in the pharma industry. TCG Life Sciences (TCGLS), a leading contract research services, clinical research, and laboratory informatics company with operations in India, Europe, Japan, Australia and the US, offers a unique mode, which it has built on its strengths and forged strategic partnerships that has helped it essay the role of a partner rather than just a service provider.

Kolkata-based TCGLS, which has a strength of almost 1,000 employees across three divisions of Chembiotek (discovery research), Clininvent (clinical research and development) and Labvantage (enterprise informatics), recently delivered on one such partnership with Pfizer, in February 2012, and with Endo pharmaceuticals, in January 2012.

Mr Swapan Bhattacharya, MD, TCG Life Sciences, who has been with the company for over 14 years, speaks to BioSpectrum about these successful partnerships and what differentiates the firm from other CROs.

Q Can you tell us about the partnership with Pfizer?

Mr Bhattacharya: We have had collaborations with Pfizer for over nine years. When they first came to India, they were looking to partner with different CROs. Over the years, they have consolidated a list of CROs and, at this point, we are the only CRO that is providing chemistry and discovery services to Pfizer in India.

In 2009 we signed an agreement, which changed the mode of operations, where our relationship transformed into a more

strategic one. We were given the opportunity to not only work on more targets and be more proactive in designing the program, but also contribute from our side in terms of risk taking, which was termed as integrated drug development project. Today, we have a pre-clinical development candidate ready, as per the agreement.

Q Can you elaborate on your collabration with Endo Pharmaceuticals?

Mr Bhattacharya: In a span of less than two years, we developed a pre-clinical drug candidate for long-term post operative care for Endo through an interesting partnership.

Another program involving the development of a first-in-class drug, whose first phase was completed in less than the allocated time, is also showing a lot of potential. We hope to finish this project soon.

Instead of building the infrastructure for discovery operations, Endo is using CROs in partnership. They are managing the program and we are carrying out all the work. It is a very synergistic way of working as we are both working on our strengths. The rights for exploiting the intellectual property (IP) is owned completely by the client.

Actually we got the contract for the second program, while we were still doing the first one. I think this is because we try to creatively eliminate the impediments in drug discovery early on. The programs are controlled by a joint steering committee that has an equal representation of people from both the organizations. So this is less of a service and more of a collaboration. We look at it like a partnership.

Q What is the business model of TCGLS?

Mr Bhattacharya: We have tried to create an integrated chain at TCGLS. We believe that activities that can be done together and can help create synergy should be done under one roof.

For example, if you are doing drug discovery, you would want various factors from IP search to look at different libraries for a target, including absorption, distribution, metabolism, and excretion (ADME) screening and would ultimately want the disease modelling to be done at the same location.

This process works most efficiently if it is in one place. We have exploited that, and this is the competence that is seen in our work with different partners. We have certified good manufacturing practices (cGMP) facilities, which allow us to develop compounds that can be taken for first-in-man studies.

Also, in an integrated drug discovery chain, the value of the molecule goes up as the molecule moves further into the pre-clinical stages. It makes sense to get the molecule to a higher level to get its full value.

Q How would you describe your client base?

Mr Bhattacharya: If you consider all the three businesses together (Chembiotek, Clininvent and Labvantage), we provide services to 14 of the top 20 pharma companies. It's a fairly good mix of big and specialty pharma and biotechs, with big pharma constituting more than 50 percent.

All our clients are from outside India, with most of them being repeat clients. Rarely have we had a client who went away unsatisfied.

Q How is the reduced spending by big pharma affecting your operations?

Mr Bhattacharya: In the short term, it is a challenge. When a company undergoes major restructuring, people lose focus on the externalized research and that poses a problem for CROs. However, at the end of the day, health challenges will remain. There will always be a need for research. The last few years have been very challenging, but with time, we are growing.

Ultimately, we are service providers in an industry that is undergoing rapid changes. Unless we change too and add value to what we are bringing to the table, it will be very difficult.

Q With most biotech companies concentrated in small pockets in the country, do you face any difficulties being based in Kolkata?

Mr Bhattacharya: We do have offices in different cities including Mumbai, Delhi and Pune, but we are primarily based in Kolkata. Since our parent company, The Chatterjee Group, was based in Kolkata, we grew from there. The only difficulty was that Kolkata was not exactly on the global map when pharma companies came scouting for partners. They would usually not make that additional two-hour trip, which was a challenge.

However, now we see that because of our location, we are different from other CROs. We have less attrition and also very

good academic resources. We routinely do work in other cities according to the customer's needs.

What do you think sets TCGLS apart?

Q Mr Bhattacharya: We are very strong in library synthesis, chemistry and biology. We look at things from a drug discovery point-of-view, rather than a services point-of-view. I think our biggest strength would be our people, who have had considerable experience in the industry and have the ability to work alongside other companies.

We have had a very negligible attrition rate in our organization, especially in senior management. Our distinction has been our interest in innovation, early involvement in biology, and ability to take molecules from small scale to large scale. These are the areas where we seem to have an edge over others.

What are your future plans?

Q Mr Bhattacharya: We are clearly defined as an early discovery company, which comprises everything that takes place before clinical trials. We think that if regulatory mechanisms permit us, then we can conduct phase I trials and develop the candidate till proof-of-concept and thus increase the value of the product.

Right now, the pre clinical candidtates are handed over to other CROs for further studies. We want to leverage on thataspect and grow in that area as well. In chemistry, as we move forward we want to get bigger. Right now we can provide supplies till first-in-man studies in phase IIA. To do the larger studies like phase III, we would need more capacity and that is something we would be looking at.

Manasi Vaidya in Bangalore