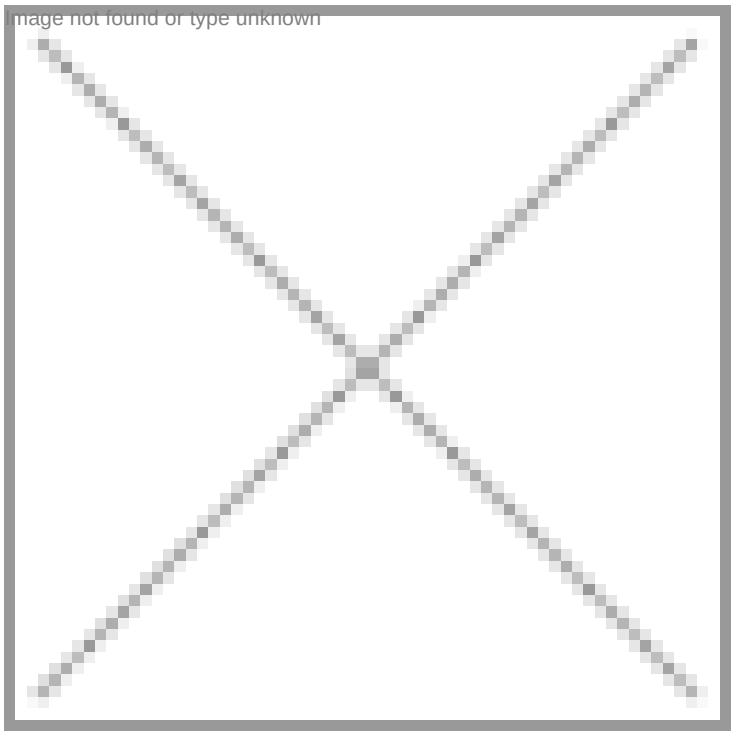
'India favored for global studies'

10 April 2007 | News



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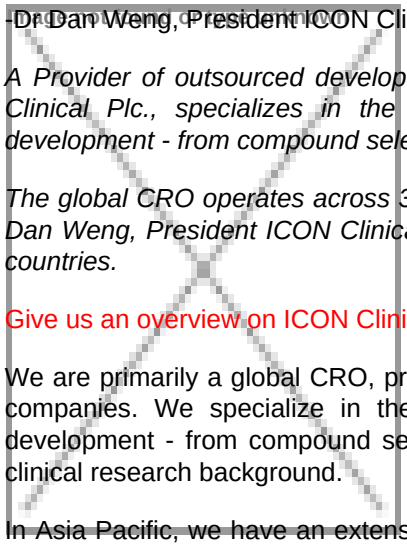

-Dr Dan Weng, President ICON Clinical Research

A Provider of outsourced development services to the pharmaceutical, biotechnology and medical devices industry, ICON Clinical Plc., specializes in the strategic development, management and analysis of programs that support clinical development - from compound selection to phase I-IV clinical studies.

The global CRO operates across 30 countries and has a wide presence in Asia Pacific. In an interview with BioSpectrum, Dr Dan Weng, President ICON Clinical Research elaborates on the company's plan to increase its presence in the Asia Pacific countries.

Give us an overview on ICON Clinical and its activities in the Asia Pacific region?

We are primarily a global CRO, providing services to speed up clinical development, to pharma, biotech and medical device companies. We specialize in the strategic development, management and analysis of programs that support clinical development - from compound selection to phase I-IV clinical studies. The core team at ICON comes from a very strong clinical research background.

In Asia Pacific, we have an extensive presence across countries and are growing. In fact, in terms of our current positioning

with regard to our competitors, we are one of the largest global CRO in the Asia Pacific region. We cover all countries including Korea, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand, India, China and Japan as well.

Cost of the clinical trials in all of the Asian countries is lower than the US and Western Europe. In India, in the next two years, we are looking at doubling our size from the current 150 people. Companies are willing to shift the trials to Asia Pacific. Industry and sponsor requirements will determine our growth rate in Asia Pacific.

What are the challenges that ICON faces in keeping up with the market requirement?

Given that our business in growing, recruiting talented people is a major challenge. We need people with experience in global studies.

In India, we want to double the size and we will be doing it by recruiting both the experienced people as well as fresh graduates, whom we will train. Hiring is a challenge in all geographies including Singapore and Korea as well. There are people with local and regional experience but not that many with global studies experience. Currently, we have 200 people on board for clinical research in Asia Pacific, excluding Japan and data management services.

At ICON we are looking more at organic growth though we are not closed to acquisitions as such. Our India operation is growing faster than China. Regulatory approvals in China take at least nine to 10 months. Even though both the countries make for competitive locations, for global studies, companies prefer India rather than China on account of regulatory issues, ease of language and so on.

Huge patient pool in India and China is an advantage. In Singapore or Hong Kong since the population size is small, even though the process is faster, we need to extend the trials, which adds to the cost.

Any improvements that you would suggest India should look at, in the regulatory process or policy?

Pharma companies across the globe are convinced that India is a great market. The support structures in India are very good. The government in India is very active on this front and is continuously making improvements. If it keeps up the same pace that is very good.

However, to pick one area that impacts us - the country can work more on documentation simplification. The audit trail clarity is not there. It can be streamlined further.

Nandita Singh