

Focus on Africa

Mary-Ann Richardson, managing director of the African Clinical Research Association, explains how infrastructures are changing to enable the continent to host clinical trials



Can you tell us how ACRO started?

ACRO (African Clinical Research Organisation) is the first South African, full-service, black-empowered, CRO. We operate in southern Africa and other African regions. It began after the South African government devised a biotechnology strategy to address some of the country's most pressing human health issues. LIFElab, a government organisation established as part of that strategy, and Batswadi Pharmaceuticals, a local, privately owned, black-empowered company with a focus on biotechnology, quickly understood a critical link was missing from the chain of services required to implement the Government's plans: local clinical development of products at affordable costs.

LIFElab and Batswadi therefore jointly established ACRO to provide affordable clinical research services in South Africa and across the continent.

Launched in August 2007, it has since quadrupled its staff and become active across a broad range of clinical areas, including drug development, medical devices and other interventions outside the purely biotech domain. Important aims of the organisation remain helping to improve the care of those affected by HIV/

AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and other diseases prevalent in African populations, and fostering research through assisting local innovators realise the potential of discoveries that might otherwise never reach the clinic or market.

ACRO is committed to capacity building across the southern African region, and has formed strategic development partnerships with companies that have a solid base in South Africa and/or a strong African emphasis.

How is the clinical trial industry developing in South Africa?

The clinical trial industry in South Africa was worth an estimated R826m (US\$101.5m) during 2000. An industry survey conducted at the end of 2008 showed an estimated value of R2.12b (US\$260.6m) for the year with 51% of the research managed by CROs.

Increasingly, clinical trials are being conducted in Africa: sponsor organisations have gained confidence in the continent as a venue for research and begun to focus on treatments for endemic diseases that impact global health, such as HIV/AIDS, TB, and malaria.

In the current economic downturn, outsourcing companies are calling for judicious spending and accelerated drug development timelines. They are eager to further the development of their products in countries with expertise in conducting clinical trials and excellent track records of participant recruitment and retention. South Africa has a population that is diverse both genetically and socio-economically and is also in need of safe and effective therapies for a broad range of diseases. It also has experienced trial sites, a sound regulatory framework and efficient telecommunications, IT, and transport

systems. Furthermore, working with a local CRO, such as ACRO, can reduce costs. ACRO has a sound knowledge of the African clinical trial environment, offers affordable pricing and tailors its services to meet clients' needs. It has also formed networks with CROs operating within single countries to provide cost-effective solutions on multinational trials: through such networking, ACRO is able to offer clients a unified interface to locally-based service provision, which carries the advantages of regional costing and other benefits.

How do you describe your position in the marketplace?

ACRO offers services to donor funders, non-governmental organisations, research institutions, pharmaceutical and medical device companies, as well as government institutions, both within and outside the biotechnology sector.

Some clients require assistance with just one or two aspects of their product's development, and some with charting and then travelling from early-stage research through to product registration and marketing. We work closely with each of our clients and tailor solutions to their particular needs.

Consonant with our broader vision of building clinical research capacity, ACRO has an active training department in addition to the functions characteristic of full-service CROs.

How do you see your organisation in a couple of years?

During the remainder of 2009 and 2010, we aim to increase our global market share and attract new clients internationally, especially those needing help with the conduct of clinical trials. We also aim to broaden our local client base and deepen our relationships with current clients by embarking on new projects and providing additional services. Finally, as a central component of ACRO's mission, we aim to make our training services available throughout Africa.

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