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Swapna Bhattacharya, director and head, TCG Lifesciences

Kolkata-based TCG Lifesciences (TCGLS) is a comprehensive R&D services provider to the pharma and biotech companies in the drug discovery and development domain. A project of the US-based investment entity, The Chatterjee Group (TCG), it has made four distinct forays into research services. In a freewheeling interview, Swapna Bhattacharya, director and head, TCG Lifesciences, talks about the various services offered by its business entities.

What is the aim and focus of TCG Lifesciences?

Our goal is to make TCG Lifesciences Asia's largest CRO with the best scientific minds and simultaneously create value for our shareholders, employees and the community. Keeping in line with this objective, we at TCG Lifesciences constantly focus on partnering with various pharma and biotech companies, with the aim to provide a wide range of services through our integrated service platform/engine. This in turn helps us build strong strategic partnerships and gives us a competitive advantage over the existing players in this domain.

How successful has TCGLS been in its various forays-synthesis of new chemical entities (Chembiotek Research International), bioinformatics (SilicoGene Informatics) and clinical trials (ClinInvent Research) and genomic (TCGA)?

The proof of our success lies in the fact that we have 15 of the top 20 global pharma companies as our clients to whom we provide a wide range of customized and high-end integrated services in clinical research, library synthesis, molecular modeling computational sciences and life sciences informatics. Chembiotek has been expanding at a fast pace and has achieved several milestones since its inception. The changing dynamics of the pharma and biotech industries and an expanding client base have given rise to a compelling need to enhance our scientific strength. To meet this need and to increase our footprint across the country, Chembiotek has commenced operations from our second state-of-the-art facility at the International Biotech Park at Pune.

How is the partnership between TCGLS and the different national labs shaping up?

We are aware that industry-wide collaborative efforts are needed to build the necessary research infrastructure in India by specifically addressing chokepoints in the discovery value chain. The Centre for Genomic Applications (TCGA) is one such initiative in this direction.

TCGA , a collaboration between the Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology (IGIB), Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) research institute, and The Chatterjee Group (TCG) is anchored on the public-private partnerships model, with an aim to cut down the research time and cost in the area of genomics and proteomics.

The core shared facility at TCGA provides sophisticated equipment, as well as the related essential technical services to the research community that individual companies and entrepreneurs might otherwise be unable to gain access. The cost savings from replacing operations distributed across multiple sites with a single, highly focused core shared facility are substantial.

TCGA also offers the opportunity and the environment for investigators with varied backgrounds and interests to interface and develop collaborations based on their common use of a particular technology.

So far, TCGA has undertaken projects from research institutes like IGIB, CDRI, CCMB and IMTECH. It is now evolving as a well-equipped facility for high-end biology research and is also offering its research facilities to all other R&D institutes on a fee-for-service basis.

Along with the Indian Statistical Institute, Centre for Population Genomics, TCGA is also building genetic-epidemiological research capacity in India. Their research-training project focuses on genetic epidemiology and ethical conduct of human genetics research in India, with particular emphasis on statistical and computational and molecular genomics. TCGA is also working with the Institute of Human Behavior and Allied Sciences (IHBAS) on a pharmacogenomics project for anti-epileptic drugs.

TCGA has not only enhanced optimization by centralizing resources but has also helped organizations and institutions in overcoming the infrastructure speed breakers, which are significant barriers to the creation of internal industrial-scale facilities.

What is the USP of TCGLS?

Some of the key distinguishing features of TCG Lifesciences include:

Integrated services platform across discovery and development space:

TCGLS has built capabilities across key segments of drug discovery and development cycle. The integrated platform of capabilities enables it to partner large pharma and biotech companies in their search for new drugs with an array of capabilities unmatched by other contract research organizations. All operations are managed by independent teams to ensure that capabilities in the specific domains are tested against the best in the market and are constantly upgraded.

Scientific skills remain the main strength:

TCG Lifesciences has engaged teams of high caliber scientists and set up world-class infrastructure to participate in post genomic life sciences research. The number of PhD scientists, including those with experience in the US and Europe, employed by TCGLS is significantly higher than any comparable CRO in India. The scientific leadership team comprises professionals with excellent track record of leading successful research programs and collaborations at the highest level in their specific domains.

Strong advisory board:

An Advisory Board, comprising eminent scientists, business strategists and investment experts internationally recognized in their fields of expertise, actively supports TCG Lifesciences. The advisory board members participate in providing strategic direction, syndicating contracts for TCG Lifesciences and in providing scientific and technology inputs to the scientists. The constitution of the board reflects:

- Expertise in drug discovery and development, which aligns with the group's service offerings
- Extensive network of relationships with leading pharma and biotech companies
- Eminent academic scientists, providing access to current and emerging technologies
- Relationships with venture capitalists and private equity investors that ensure constant updation of emerging investment trends and opportunities.

How do you see the services sector in this arena growing?

The markets for targeted, customized therapies promises to grow. In addition, some of these therapies might sidestep current medical silos to cut across disease categories and physician specialties. This shift will call for a new paradigm across the innovation chain-from development through clinical testing and commercialization. In the new landscape, nimble companies with diverse capabilities are likely to outdistance monolithic ones.

In this scenario, outsourcing (services) companies in assisting the pharma industry will have to seek ways of adding value to pharmaceutical companies. In this arduous task, the value chain model will help the outsourcing and services companies in analyzing specific activities through which firms can maintain value and have competitive advantage. In view of the fact that every phase of the value chain model requires the development of specific skills, added value technology, expertise, regulatory knowledge and know-how, outsourcing services companies are evolving into different forms (Contract Distribution Organizations (CDOs), Contract Research Organizations (CROs) and Contract Manufacturing Organizations (CMOs) to efficiently supply the pharma industry and to differentiate themselves from the competition.

The purpose of the service model will be to prove to be an indispensable partner through reliability and a comprehensive range of services.

We have already begun to witness a paradigm shift with respect to partnering models, which are evolving, from the plain vanilla transactional relationships to more strategic partnerships.

Rolly Dureha