Africa: an advantageous landscape for conducting clinical trials

Africa has immense potential as an emerging market, and pharmaceutical and biotech companies have many avenues to leverage from **Barc Lab**'s African footprint for running clinical trials.

Accounting for nearly 17% of the global population, and representing a diverse population of potential patients, the African continent offers many of the best conditions for conducting clinical trials. Importantly, a number of diseases – particularly those defined as neglected and tropical – are endemic to the developing world, which includes Africa. Despite all these advantages, Africa contributes to less than 3% of the number of clinical trials. The lack of infrastructure, cultural barriers and dedicated staff, and misunderstanding of requirements to work in the region, are simultaneously causing a burden to conducting clinical trials within Africa. However, Barc Lab believes that Africa offers an enormous opportunity for pharmaceutical and biotech companies searching for low-cost study sites, low risk of litigation and a diverse patient population. The latter makes Africa an ideal location for research, as the diseases of affluence and poverty are prevalent. Moreover, the majority of patients to be potentially enrolled in clinical trials have not received any previous treatment for their disease – either because it is not available or they cannot afford it – facilitating patient recruitment to a great extent.

Joined-up engagement

Barc Lab, part of Cerba Healthcare Group, has been focusing on central lab activities for the past 35 years. It has established a portfolio of customers, based in Europe and the US, who need to expand to the Africa region in order to easily enroll participants into both interventional and non-interventional studies. Barc Lab can draw on the support of the Cerba HealthCare and Lancet networks, who have joined

Barc Lab's footprint in Africa, comprising of the Lancet Laboratory (light blue) and the Cerba HealthCare (dark blue) network of labs, across a total of 23 countries throughout Africa.

forces to become the medical biological and diagnostic leaders in Africa. With over 11,000 collaborators who share the same goal for providing patients, physicians, pharmaceutical and biotech companies with the best healthcare service, CerbaLancet ensures that patients, irrespective of their geographical location, benefit from proximity, quality and innovative biology. This new joint venture follows a successful collaboration between the two diagnostic leaders and creates a network with coverage in over 23 African countries. The establishment of this joint venture, and the increased resources within the group in Africa, make this the ideal opportunity for Barc Lab to expand its activity across the African continent and become the global leader in central laboratory services in Africa.

Identifiable data

Barc Lab, together with the Cerba HealthCare group and the Lancet Laboratories network, is working extensively to use digital technology to help identifying patient population across Africa. It can give its clients access to reams of patient data, either through diagnostics or biological profile. This approach has the potential to expand the number of clinical trials throughout Africa conducted in any setting, including low-resource settings.

In fact, Africa can be considered a 'greenfield' site, allowing companies to exploit and introduce innovative approaches, and to use digital technologies to pinpoint where patients are based by searching through Barc Lab's database. With artificial intelligence (AI) maturing, Barc Lab is also engaging and implementing AI to optimise clinical trials. The company aims to gain insight into the data its gathers throughout clinical trials, including Africa. Combining data from electronic records on a global scale, Barc Lab is able to compare patient populations all over the world, and to help target the required geographic area with the eligible patient population for a particular indication. These AI-driven insights are data-intensive, and can increase the efficiency, and reduce the costs of clinical trials through improved protocol design and targeted patient enrolment.

As promising as this is, with regard to the concept of evidence-based medicine, additional clinical trials are needed in the Africa region to understand how treatments will affect African populations. Those results can be used to inform practice and healthcare guidelines. To overcome the lack of evidence from the African region, Barc Lab will work closely together with the Cerba HealthCare and Lancet networks to compile and deliver this information.

Move forward

With the expansion into Africa, Barc Lab will work with the local and regional stakeholders to mitigate risks and develop a comprehensive solution to run clinical trials for the pharmaceutical industry, CROs and NGOs. Barc Lab in Africa will be the ideal partner to provide the service and expertise to routinely conduct medical clinical testing under recognised US accreditation, thus ensuring that the tests offered are also performed daily for diagnostic purposes, patients' stratification, staging, therapeutic indication and follow-up.

Up until today, the focus on clinical research has primarily been on infectious diseases, particularly HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria, as large numbers of the country's population are greatly affected by these diseases. Nevertheless, cooperative clinical trial groups, sponsored by the National Cancer Institute, have already begun working in the Africa region, showing a large interest to also bring cancer therapies to Africa.

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As challenging as it may seem, Africa presents a unique profile that interests many pharmaceutical and biotech companies. Changing requirements – such as patient diversity and the need for greater subject numbers in clinical trials, in parallel with improved clinical research environments in African countries – are resulting in a notable growth in clinical research in the region. ■

Success story: Barc Lab South Africa

Barc Lab has established a portfolio of customers, based in Europe and the US, who need to expand to the Africa region to be able to easily enroll participants into large phase II or III studies. A joint venture between Lancet Laboratories and Barc Lab was founded in 1999, namely, Barc Lab South Africa. This has been a fruitful relationship and has established the groundwork for working in Africa. Barc Lab South Africa has experience with a broad client base who work, or would like to further their work, in Africa. According to many investigators, South Africa provides a better environment for clinical trials than many other African nations, and because of this it can serve as a model for clinical research in Africa and to help improve preventive care.

Partnering with Lancet Laboratories, Barc Lab has been able to set up and manage clinical trials in Africa for two decades. With a local team based in Johannesburg, Barc Lab South Africa has conducted multiple trials in a wide range of different therapeutic areas. Working closely together with the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), NGOs, CROs and pharmaceutical companies, Barc Lab has localised expertise which allows it to expand and execute trials in the entire Africa region, taking Barc Lab South Africa as an example. This expansion can be seen in the rest of Africa, as the laboratory infrastructure improves and acts as a catalyst for conducting clinical trials in the entire Africa region.

Further information
Barc Lab
www.barclab.com