

"Cost-effectiveness is our biggest competitive advantage"

11 September 2006 | News

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Vivek Trikha, head-Diagnostics, OncQuest

How did OncQuest come into being?

A division of Dabur Pharma had been operating as one of the specialized sections of one of the biggest cancer hospitals in Delhi. At one point in time, we decided to come out of it and start offering our technology to patients all over the country rather than be hospital-specific. This was the key driving force to move out and OncQuest began its operations in 2003.

Why did you choose to operate in the oncology segment?

From the onset, we were very clear about the space in which we wanted to offer our services. We decided to operate only in oncology diagnostics despite having equipment which can be used for infectious diseases and endocrine diseases. This decision was basically taken keeping in mind the needs of oncology issues which are very different from other disease-related issues. Patient management is a continuous process in oncology. There's a lot of inflow of information between the clinician and the pathology lab, which is where we wanted to make a niche for ourselves. We have received a lot of respect and acknowledgement for the kind of work that we've been doing in this field.

Who are your customers and what are the services you offer?

Our customers are primarily oncology hospitals, nursing homes and CROs and our tests are prescription based. We offer a wide variety of cancer testing services. Our laboratory tests can help the oncologists answer specific questions about a patient's cancer. The laboratory utilizes the experience and expertise of trained scientists and physicians to provide clinicians with an incisive diagnosis and prognosis (monitoring) to identify disease and provide monitoring solutions at the fine point of differentiation of a disease. Batteries of molecular tests are performed, that helps the oncologist answer specific questions such as: Is the tumour malignant? What is the type of cancer ? How aggressive is the cancer? Is it likely to recur?

OncQuest has introduced a number of techniques to evaluate the structure of DNA, RNA or proteins in cells. The most common methods used in the clinical setting include Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR), real time PCR, fluorescent in-situ-hybridization (FISH), cytogenetics, flow cytometry, immunohistochemistry and routine surgical pathology. A number of these different methodologies can be used to detect the same abnormality. The selection of one technique over another is often based on a variety of factors, such as sensitivity and specificity profiles, cost, turnaround time and availability of technologically advanced and competitively priced laboratory set up.

Are you servicing hospitals abroad or are there any issues?

There are no major issues as such. But there are issues with regards to country-specific licensing and accreditation, which we have to tide over. We have started working on it and we would certainly look at catering to international markets.

We have introduced an exclusive molecular testing facility in the area of diagnostic oncology for the first time in South East Asia and we are looking at expanding our reach toward neighboring countries in the months to come. The specimens from neighboring countries should start coming within six months to one year. And we are expecting an accreditation from the National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories (NABL) for our testing facility soon.

What is your USP?

The concept of oncology diagnostic lab is relatively new in India. And OncQuest is a trend-setter in this segment. We have a wing of Dabur Research Foundation working with us and the team is constantly in the endeavor of finding newer assays or more cost-effective assays than what is commercially available in the form of a kit. We have been able to indigenously make world class quality reagents to support being very cost-effective for the patients. So cost-effectiveness is our biggest competitive advantage. We must have carried out about 10,000 tests that have been prescribed by over 2,500 doctors and our charges ranges between Rs 200 and Rs 20,000, which are significantly cheaper than the fee charged by laboratories in the developed countries.

What makes you different?

We are a little different than the other diagnostic centers. In the sense that we are very city-specific. We work on a model by which we have our outsourced logistics agents, who do our logistics work, collect specimens either from the hospital or from the doctor's clinic or from the patient's house and send it across to us in Delhi. Our logistics company in Bangalore is Medybiz. All service-related nitty gritty details are taken care of and we work clearly in terms of prescription generation unlike direct-to-patients, which happens in routine tests. We cover about 30 locations in India which include all the metros and also semi-urban towns like Ludhiana, Lucknow, Jaipur, Mangalore and Panaji.

N Suresh with Namratha Jagtap