

Breaking News on Drug Discovery

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Human tissue worth more than diamonds

06/07/2006- Using human tissue to test new drugs at earlier stages of development can speed drugs to market faster, however, human tissue remains a scarce resource for drug firms – something that US firm Asterand has set out to change.

Drugs that prove safe in preclinical animal testing often end up failing when they are first tested in humans, wasting precious time and money that the pharma industry can ill afford.

It is now estimated that the average cost of bringing a new drug to market is \$1bn (€0.8bn) and is increasing at a rate of nearly 50 per cent every five to seven years.

However, using human instead of animal tissue in earlier stages of new drug testing will help to more accurately predict the safety of new treatments, especially liver toxicity - one of the most common reasons for a drug not being approved.

This will help identify toxicity problems with new drugs before they are tested on humans, and thus reduce the number of new drug failures and speed up drug development, according to the Critical Path (C-Path) Institute, set up by the University of Arizona, and the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to investigate ways of improving drug development.

The organisation believes that a ten per cent increase in the speed of drug development can save \$100m for every new drug.

This sounds simple enough, but traditionally it has been hard for drug firms to get hold of human tissue due to ethical issues and the challenges of patient and family consent.

As a result, human tissue is said to be worth more than diamonds, being valued at \$500/gram.

Furthermore, research with human tissue has often been problematic due to inconsistent standardisation and quality control of the samples being sourced by researchers.

Spotting a gap in the industry, UK's Pharmagene merged with US company Asterand in January to form a human tissue supply and research services company with an extended tissue supply network of over 70 sites in the US and Europe as well as a biorepository over 300,000 samples, making it the largest contract research organisation (CRO) of its kind in the world.

"We are the only CRO that focuses completely on providing this key resource," Asterand CEO Randal Charlton told Outsourcing-Pharma.com.

The enlarged group, also called Asterand, now offers biopharma firms two types of contract services: from its facilities in Detroit, UK and those of its partner firm Mitsui, based in Tokyo, Japan, it offers supply services involving the processing and banking of tissue; from its labs in Royston the firm carries out research services and generates data.

"We have a 24-hour research service in Royston that can provide "on demand" tissue services so that the fragile tissue samples can be used the moment they become available," said Charlton.

"This is unique, nobody else offers such a service."

Although the firm is now working with 18 of the top 20 pharma companies, this highly specialised type of outsourcing is only just starting to take off.

"Our revenues are still small and we are still only at the early stages of our relationship with the pharma industry, however, the market for tissue research is expected to grown quickly to reach \$700m by 2007 and we are now planning to expand our market penetration in the US and Europe."

"Because of our round the clock services and our global network of hospitals that feed our tissue supply, we can conduct research faster and generate data faster and cheaper than pharma firms could do in-house."

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