

Innovation for Unmet Patient Needs: Multinational pharmaceutical companies deliver value to Malaysia through clinical trials

By: Dr June Choon Wai Yee

In the realm of medical innovation and patient care, Malaysia has achieved remarkable milestones in the clinical research landscape. As an invited delegate at the Clinical Trial Connect 2024 held on May 9 & 10, I witnessed the nation's impressive strides; a record-breaking 276 newly sponsored clinical research studies brought in RM 1.16 billion in cumulative gross national income and created 2753 skilled jobs in clinical research since 2012. Surpassing its targets and previous years' accomplishments, Malaysia stands tall as a frontrunner in clinical trials within the Southeast Asia region, having secured second place in the number of global industry-sponsored studies.



The global clinical trial market was valued at over US\$80 billion (RM379.28 billion) in 2023, with projected annual growth of 6.5%. At the opening ceremony of the Clinical Trial Connect 2024, Datuk Seri Dr. Dzulkefly Ahmad, Minister of Health Malaysia, urged the country to seize the opportunities in the field by reviewing regulations and policies to remain relevant to industry and market needs. He also highlighted that multinational pharmaceutical companies and contract research

organisations (CROs) not only view Malaysia as a trial location but also as a regional base for clinical research operations. This is evident as Parexel Malaysia, a CRO, and Hematogenix, a central oncology laboratory, were set up in Malaysia to support the APAC region.

One of the most notable aspects of Malaysia's clinical research landscape is its focus on early-phase research, where significant breakthroughs happen. Ampang Hospital, one of the accredited First-in-Human (FIH) centres in Malaysia, initiated its inaugural First-in-Patient study in November 2023. Similarly, Sarawak General Hospital garnered international recognition for its successful conduct of a global FIH study, further enhancing Malaysia's reputation as a hub for cutting-edge medical research.

Building upon these achievements, Malaysia has captured the attention of top global biopharmaceutical companies, with two new FIH clinical trials to commence by mid-2024. Sarawak General Hospital, once again at the forefront of innovation, will host these groundbreaking studies focusing on systemic lupus erythematosus (sponsored by Roche Pharmaceuticals) and solid tumour research (sponsored by AstraZeneca).

Innovative research and development pipelines, especially those with the potential to yield first-in-class treatments and blockbuster drugs, necessitate active engagement with global industry and research leaders for successful materialization. In 2023, AstraZeneca took the number one spot for new sponsored research, closely followed by 2022's top contributor, Novartis. Similar to other developed nations, non-communicable diseases have emerged as a significant public health concern in Malaysia. The most sponsored research in 2023 focused on oncology/hemato-onco, with infections and infectious diseases, cardiology, and vascular diseases following in second and third place, respectively.



The significance of these developments extends beyond mere numbers and statistics; they epitomise Malaysia's commitment to addressing unmet medical needs. Clinical trials of innovative medicines not only offer hope to patients grappling with complex health conditions but also pave the way for future breakthroughs in medical science. For Malaysian patients, access to cutting-edge treatments through clinical trials represents a ray of hope. Clinical trial participation offers a gateway for participants to access potential novel treatments that may not yet be available and high-quality medical care by a trained team of health professionals.

Looking ahead, Malaysia's trajectory in clinical research remains promising, with a continued emphasis on fostering innovation, enhancing patient-centric approaches, and strengthening global industry collaborations. As the nation continues to push the boundaries of medical research, academics play a vital role in contributing to the clinical trial landscape in Malaysia by leveraging their expertise, research capabilities, and institutional resources through collaboration with industry partners, healthcare professionals, and regulatory authorities.

About the Author

Dr. June Choon Wai Yee was a former academic and health economics researcher at Monash University. Prior to joining UiTM, she served as the scientific advisor for the Pharmaceutical Association of Malaysia (PhAMA) and its Clinical Research Committee led by Novartis (M) and Roche (M). She also sat on the National Committee of Clinical Research (NCCR), chaired by the Director-General of Health, Malaysia.



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