

PRA keeps it local, goes global

The research giant knows the importance of tight partnerships in Victoria

By Mat Loup

Among those leading the charge in British Columbia's biotech sector, have a look at PRA International. One of the top five global contract research organizations, the company has a significant presence in Victoria.

PRA's mission is clear: to develop medications with its partners to improve the lives of patients world-wide. And some of those partners are B.C.'s finest biotech companies, as Victoria has housed one of PRA's three global data management hubs since 2002. Here, PRA provides a whole suite of services, from protocol and product development to flexible data capture technologies, all the way to clinical trials and execution to industry-recognized standards. The other hubs are in Swansea, Wales; and Lenexa, Kansas.

According to Bruce Teplitzky, PRA's executive vice-president for strategic business development, keeping it close to home is a vital part of the company's future. "PRA is really a local business," he says. "Typically, the people that work at PRA in Victoria have very close relationships with the personnel that work in the B.C. biotech scene. We partner very tightly with them."

PRA has come a long way from its foundation in Virginia in 1976 in data management and biostatistics. Success brought expansion and then a three-year period of going public that ended in December 2007, when the company was taken private again by Genstar Capital LLC, a private equity investment firm with more than \$3 billion of committed capital on its books. PRA now has approximately 3,500 staff members distributed among 26 offices over five continents.

At least half of the company's focus is on emerging biotech, with particular



Bruce Teplitzky, executive VP for strategic business development, has 20 years of experience in drug development

From its hub in Victoria, British Columbia, PRA International manages a major suite of biotech services

attention paid to the development of drugs for the central nervous system, cancer, allergy and respiratory problems. A new drug can take eight years and four phases of clinical research to arrive on the commercial market, but PRA speeds up the time for availability.

Phase I is the first introduction of a new chemical into a human being, typically done through a volunteer population. If that proves safe, then the trial moves to Phase II, which is typically small and tightly controlled and is usually the first time the drug is tested on the actual target population. Phase III tests the successful hypoth-

esis on a larger population to enable the drug's registration with regulatory authorities. Finally, Phase IV is the follow-up trial, conducted over a much more substantial population and normally required by governments before the drug is used commercially.

"A lot of biotech firms have three or four candidates to test, and we help them rationalize," says Teplitzky. "With a limited amount of cash and four molecules, how do you find out which of those molecules to prioritize? That's where we come in to advise."

On the world stage, PRA's principal competitors in this highly specialized field are Quintiles Transnational Corp., PPD, Covance and ACON Laboratories, Inc. But in Victoria, biotech knows it counts a true giant as one of its own. ■