

Clinical approach to trials pays off for entrepreneur

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By Peter Ranscombe

FROM ClinTec International's headquarters in Glasgow, chief executive Dr Rabinder Buttar has a remarkable view of all the River Clyde's most famous landmarks, from long-standing favourites like the Finnieston crane and the SECC's Armadillo, through to more recent additions such as the "squinty" bridge and the BBC's Pacific Quay studios.

But Buttar has set her sights beyond Scotland to 40 countries in which her clinical research organisation operates. Her company, which carries out clinical trials for pharmaceutical companies and acts as a consultant to biotechnology firms and medical device makers, already has 279 staff and is expected to take on a further 150 in the next 12 months to meet the influx of work.

While many Scots life science outfits will only travel from the university that spawned them to the nearest bio-incubator centre, Buttar's story, and that of ClinTec, is a far more exotic tale - one that has caught the eye of both politicians and business experts who are keen for more biotech companies to follow her example.

Born in the Punjab region of India, Buttar's family moved to Scotland when she was five. Her parents, who both trained as teachers, took jobs where they could, with her father working as a ticket inspector on the buses. Their five children now all live and work in Scotland.

Buttar's own journey led her to study biochemistry and immunology at Glasgow and Strathclyde universities, before working in London for drugs giant Wellcome, later swallowed up by GlaxoSmithKline.

Her husband, a dentist she met at university, took a job in Hamburg, Germany, before buying a practice near Dusseldorf. Buttar worked as part of a small team at Japanese firm Fujisawa in Germany, which launched a multi-billion-dollar drug to stop transplant patients' bodies from rejecting their new organs.

When she decided to have children, Buttar set up her own consultancy business in 1994. Two years later ClinTec was spawned. In 2007 she took the brave decision to uproot both her business and family to Glasgow.

"I thought long and hard about the move because it was a risk," explains Buttar. "But it's only since moving back that the business has really started to grow rapidly and I've built a team here

who are hungry to work for a global company."

While working in Germany, Buttar retained close links with the life science community back in Scotland. She hosted firms on behalf of the Scottish Government when they visited Germany and ministers were keen to see her return home.

A framed photograph of Enterprise Minister Jim Mather with Buttar hanging in ClinTec's reception pays testament to the move back in 2007.

The firm received £1.3 million in grant funding to help with the change, but Buttar said the money was closely tied to creating the 42 posts at the Glasgow head office.

While grateful for the financial assistance she received, Buttar believes the money was too closely tied to job creation and that the Scottish Government should be more flexible in its grant-making to established companies to help them grow. "After all, we're bringing jobs to Scotland and generating wealth for all of our advisers and other businesses round about us in Glasgow," says Buttar .

ClinTec has expanded into numerous overseas markets - from South America to South-East Asia, via Africa, the Middle East and India - at the request of the large pharmaceutical companies with which it works.

"They've really led our growth," explains Buttar. "We had one client who we'd worked with in Europe and they asked us to carry out the same project for them in Mexico. Our success has been down to working in emerging markets - we were in Eastern Europe before any of the big players and now the Middle East and Africa - and that's what they're looking for.

"Big pharma companies are restructuring and shifting their focus to emerging markets and they recognise that we can help them with their clinical trials and gaining regulatory approval for new drugs."

While the company has research bases in 40 countries, its partnerships with 25 out of the 50 biggest drug makers has led to fruitful work in the United States. "We often act as the overseas office for a lot of the American companies because we have a lot of local knowledge and can offer a very fast service," says Buttar.

ClinTec this month appointed Dr Dianne Kikta, former executive vice-president of global clinical strategic resourcing at drugs giant Wyeth, to the new role of executive vice-president in the US to help grow the business further.

Last year, sales grew by 45 per cent to £11.3m, with profits topping £1m. Buttar expects a similar level of growth this year, thanks in part to a new multi-million contract with a top ten pharma heavyweight. But the firm's founder is still ploughing profits back into the business to fuel further expansion.

"I've built the company up with my own money so it's very gratifying that we're now profitable,"

she says. "We have very little debt and only recently took on private equity investment to help us expand further into South-East Asia."

The announcement last month that Aim-listed Elephant Capital had bought a near 30 per cent stake in the firm for £8m signalled the next stage in its Indian expansion. But just as important as the cash was the backing of investors Gaurav Burman and James Hauslein, who joined the ClinTec board to add their Indian business acumen.

The company has operated in India for eight years and now has 50 staff in its Bangalore office.

But Buttar is keen to expand further in the land of her birth and has formed a partnership with Oracle to develop data handling capabilities. "We see lots of room for further expansion in India," Buttar explains, "as it also allows us to offer clients a round-the-clock service. I want to use the talent in India to help grow the business."

Using local talent is a key theme for Buttar, who set up a global academy in Dubai to train her own staff and those working in local markets, such as the US Food and Drug Administration's Saudi Arabian office.

Buttar thinks other Scottish firms could follow in her footsteps: "As long as they have firm foundations here at home, then I think there are a lot of opportunities for Scottish firms working in life sciences and other sectors too. I know that a lot of Indian firms would like to form joint ventures."

But while ClinTech has global reach, Buttar is still keen to keep the business as a medium-sized Scots-headquartered firm. "Our clients tell us that they like the fact we can respond quickly to projects and that we don't have that many levels of management within the company - we can reach decisions quickly. That's important and, while I want the company to grow, I don't want to lose that ability to respond quickly and with a lot of local knowledge."

The best may be yet to come for ClinTec. Buttar scooped the Ernst & Young Scotland entrepreneur of the year award in the spring and is in the running for next month's UK title. Her firm may need a bigger trophy cabinet in reception - Buttar has already been named entrepreneur of the year at both the Scottish Asian Business Awards and the Glasgow leg of the Institute of Director's prize scheme.