India becoming backbone of global clinical research

India has emerged as a key player in international clinical trials, showcasing resilience even in the face of global hurdles. With research and innovation on the rise, firms like Parexel recognize India's crucial contribution to ensuring consistent business operations. Instead of threats, artificial intelligence presents avenues for professionals to expand their roles and skillsets.

Mumbai: India is a "critically important backbone" for global clinical trials despite rising geopolitical tensions and regulatory uncertainty, according to Peyton Howell, chief executive of Parexel, a top clinical research organization (CRO). The country's role is expanding as the industry navigates supply chain disruptions and protectionist moves.

"India is growing and really thriving in terms of clinical research," Howell said at the summit. "Our hub centres out of India have supported global clinical trial business continuity, and we expect that to continue."

Durham, North Carolina-based Parexel employs 22,000 people globally, with 6,000 based in India. Howell noted that while the company has not seen significant disruption specifically from its Indian operations, the broader global landscape remains volatile.

"We have had to manage a wide range of disruptions, particularly because of regulatory uncertainty," Howell said, citing challenges in the US and conflicts in various regions as factors impacting international trials.

As some nations move toward more "nationalist" regulatory reforms, Howell argued that maintaining a global footprint is essential for scientific integrity.

"In clinical research, the accuracy of what we do is impaired if it is not representative of the globe," she said. "We certainly need patients that participate in clinical trials that represent all of the globe."

AI worries

Addressing concerns that artificial intelligence (AI) could lead to significant job losses in the healthcare sector, Howell described the technology as an "opportunity" to elevate professional roles rather than replace them.

She cited Parexel's India-based global safety business as a primary example with teams having used AI to automate routine tasks.

"I'd love to share one example. My head of India is in the room, and his team here that leads a global safety business was able to take some of our technology and embed it into workflow to automate some of the more routine tasks," she said. "And I think that's the real opportunity in healthcare, is to be able to elevate all of those roles. So that's a simple example, but a really important one in changing the speed and accuracy and quality of what we do. Speed, accuracy and quality, and of course, credibility is going to be important in this age of AI."

The key to healthcare is the science behind it.

"What we're seeing is actually opportunities from a jobs perspective, elevating the roles of what we do in healthcare," Howell said. "The human remains central to that patient experience... it's really emphasising the scientist at the centre of everything."

Howell added that the strength of Indian talent has allowed the local team to lead innovations currently being deployed across Parexel's global network in research and safety.

Execution focus

Despite the move toward protectionism in some geographies, Howell said Parexel's mandate remains helping clients mitigate these risks to ensure clinical trials remain inclusive.

"Well, we're a global company, so it's literally our job to help companies mitigate that risk, as we see some of the more nationalist type regulatory reforms, I think that's one of the areas that we really have to step back, because in clinical research, the accuracy of what we do is impaired if it is not representative of the globe," Howell said. "So we certainly need patients that participate in clinical trials that represent all of the globe. That's actually one of the reasons I'm here this week in India, is really trying to support and expand the number of clinical trials that are assessed here."

For the future of AI integration, Howell emphasised that "execution" and maintaining corporate culture would be as vital as the technology itself. "We need everyone to know not just what they're doing and executing, but the 'why'-how it touches a patient and how it can impact patient safety," she said.

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