BioSpectrum
the business of Bio & Health Sciences
ASIA EDITION

“The rise of the middle class in Southeast Asia is driving the adoption of NGS”

31 May 2024 | Opinion | By Ayesha Siddiqui

Taiwan-based ACT Genomics, a genomics company specialising in precision oncology with operations in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Singapore, Thailand, and the UK. The firm is looking to expand to other markets. In January 2023, ACT received the United States Food and Drug Administration (US FDA) clearance for ACTOnco, making it the first Asia-based company to receive clearance for a comprehensive genomic profiling test for all solid tumours. Walt Ling, CEO, ACT Genomics, shares with BioSpectrum Asia about the company mission, how its acquisitions by Prenetics have changed the operational dynamics, and Asia's cancer diagnosis landscape.

Can you share the solutions that ACT Genomics provides?

ACT Genomics is a leading biotech company that focuses on cancer genomics. Using advanced next-generation sequencing (NGS) platforms and sophisticated bioinformatics, we translate genetic data into actionable insights for clinical and research purposes. Our diagnostic and monitoring tools are focused on treatment selection. By integrating genomic analysis into clinical practice, we enable personalised medicine approaches that consider each patient's unique genetic profile, allowing for more targeted and effective treatments tailored to individual needs.

ACT Genomics has established collaborations with a wide range of stakeholders, including clinical professionals, pharmaceutical companies, and research institutes. How do these partnerships contribute to the company's growth and innovation strategy?

Battling cancer is a tough journey, and understanding what cancer patients go through is a top priority for us. This philosophy underpins our commitment to building an ecosystem of partners within the healthcare industry. We can better develop and deliver our tests more effectively and unlock the full potential of genetic medicine for every patient.

Collaborations with clinicians in leading hospitals in the region (such as National Taiwan University Hospital, Chang Gung Memorial Hospital, Bumrungrad Hospital, Hong Kong Sanatorium Hospital and many more), global pharmaceutical companies, and partnerships with central labs in Japan fuel our growth and innovation engine in multiple ways.

These partnerships open doors to new markets and broader patient pools, as established healthcare providers and research institutions can integrate our tests into their practices. Working with these leading organisations also strengthens our reputation and scientific credibility, attracting new customers and partners.

How does the company navigate regulatory and cultural differences across various markets in APAC to ensure compliance and effective delivery of its services?

We strongly emphasise compliance efforts across all markets we operate in, ensuring the integrity of our premium solutions through robust quality systems. Being the pioneering Asia-based genomics company to secure FDA 510(k) clearance, and with our Taiwan laboratory holding CAP accreditation, and Taiwan LDTs certification, we maintain exceptionally high standards.

Moreover, as we expand into new markets, we ingrain in all employees the importance of upholding quality and integrity, which are foundational to our core values. We conduct thorough regulatory analyses to grasp the specific requirements, laws, and regulations governing healthcare services and data privacy. Collaborating closely with legal experts and regulatory affairs professionals, we ensure compliance with local regulations and obtain necessary approvals.

We recruit local talent to operationalise our processes and services in alignment with local regulatory requirements. We also forge local partnerships with key stakeholders to adhere to regulatory standards.

How does the recent acquisition by Prenetics reshape ACT Genomics' operational strategies and objectives? Specifically, could you outline any anticipated changes in areas such as product development, market expansion, partnerships, or organisational structure?

We continue to strive to work with our partners to develop cutting-edge cancer genomic profiling to deliver targeted therapies for a range of cancer diseases.

What trends do you foresee shaping the future of cancer diagnostics and treatment in Asia Pacific?

Cancer diagnosis and treatment have come a long way from the days of just X-rays, and imaging. The adoption rate of NGS in clinical practice has steadily increased over the past decade, driven by technological advancements, cost reductions, and the growing recognition of its utility in various applications, including cancer diagnosis, personalised medicine, and genomic research.

In the Asia Pacific region, the rise of the middle class in Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand, is driving the adoption of NGS. Residents of these countries are prioritising their health and seeking more advanced medical care. NGS offers a deeper understanding of diseases, leading to more accurate diagnoses and personalised treatment plans. Due to the Internet, the growing middle-class populace has greater awareness of advanced medical technologies such as NGS.

Also, there is a growing understanding of preventive healthcare measures and how NGS can be used for early cancer detection and personalised risk assessment for various diseases. The increase in volume will continue to drive down pricing, making NGS more accessible. This trend is expected to continue where we see NGS as a more mainstream diagnostic tool for cancer.

We must address genomic data sovereignty strategically and proactively to navigate regulatory complexities, ensure compliance with local laws, safeguard data privacy, and build and maintain stakeholder trust.

Governments in this region are at various stages of developing and implementing laws and regulations related to genomic data. Markets such as Singapore, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea have more advanced laws regarding genomic data privacy, informed consent and research ethics, while other countries in the region are at the earlier stages of developing regulations surrounding the use of genomic data.

Looking ahead, what are the primary strategic priorities and goals for ACT Genomics in the next few years?

We prioritise sustaining our presence in the Asian markets, particularly focusing on Thailand, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

We aim to diversify our high-quality, best-of-breed product portfolio to better suit each market's needs. For instance, we anticipate that our small to medium-sized panels at accessible price points will better suit specific emerging markets in Southeast Asia.

In conjunction with our market expansion in Southeast Asia, we intend to penetrate the US, European, and Japanese markets by leveraging our top-quality and innovative assays. Such as RNA-based NGS testing for fusion genes and complex genomic signatures. By raising awareness of our brand, fostering key opinion leader (KOL) relationships, and strategically publishing relevant research, we can effectively target specific market segments.

Ayesha Siddiqui