

Bridging the Gap between Academic Biobanks and Industry

Academic biobanks are an incomparable resource of unique samples that represent real-life patients such as samples from cancer patients undergoing IO therapy. The specimens preserved within provide the foundation for advances in biomarker discovery, precision medicine, and other cutting-edge technologies. Unfortunately, accessing that resource can be prohibitively complex for industry researchers.

Trans-Hit Bio, based in Laval, Quebec, Canada, started 10 years ago out of a desire to bridge the gap between biobanks and industry. Trans-Hit partners with biobanks around the world to help industry scientists procure the samples they need while also respecting the policies and guidelines of the academic institutions and expectations of the PIs collecting the samples.

"It seems very simple, but to get both sides to understand each other takes time and several rounds of conversations," said Vanessa Tumilasci, PhD, commercial director of Trans-Hit Bio. Part of those conversations includes acting as a translator of sorts between two cultures, who may view biospecimens quite differently. In fact, Trans-Hit plays a biospecimen procurement CRO role for the industry. With biospecimens needs becoming each day more complex, the need of multiple sites to fulfill the need for these samples is urgent and Trans-Hit, through its network, can support this need.

"The main issue for industry is that, unfortunately, they are used to considering human biospecimens as a commodity, just like lab reagents, which they're not," said Pascal Puchois, PhD, founder and CEO of Trans-Hit. "This is why many academics hesitate to work with industry." Trans-Hit actively fosters partnerships between their biobank partners and industry clients, and the first step is clearly communicating proper use of the samples and making sure both sides understand each other's concerns.

Trans-Hit emphasizes the principles of traceability and transparency. "Traceability is very important for academic biobanks so they can respect patients consents," said Puchois. "They want to know where their samples will go, who will use them, and why." On the industry side, it's critical that scientists know the pre-analytical conditions of the samples. "Today, it's very easy for a company to request any type of sample, said Puchois. He cautions that using specimens of unknown provenance can undermine research conclusions. Surprisingly, full traceability of biospecimens is still not mandatory by regulatory agencies, but Trans-Hit ensures that the end user receives complete information on how and where the specimens have been collected.

With thousands of biobanks around the world, and new ones continually launching, companies face a daunting task to locate a biobank that's willing to partner with industry and has the specimens they need. "It's very complicated for industry to pinpoint with whom they can work," said Tumilasci. Trans-Hit consolidates that global search into one convenient network. They currently contract with nearly 150 biobanks



and are adding more all the time. At first, it took years of back and forth to hammer out agreements with individual biobanks. "It's a long process, but we are very effective, and nowadays we are happy to see some biobanks contact us directly," to sign up with the service, she said.

Trans-Hit helps biobanks gain visibility in a growing sea of biospecimen repositories. THB, when needed, also helps biobanks to be ready to work with the industry by consulting on process, timelines, contract, and others. With Trans-Hit's help, they can forge long-term collaborations with trusted industry partners. When a pharma company enlists Trans-Hit's services, they begin by canvassing their contractual network of institutions. However, if they can't find just the right specimens among the biobanks within their network, they reach out to other biobanks not yet under contract. Then they arrange for direct communication between the two entities, which facilitates the initial transfer of materials, and may also lead to other possibilities of partnerships.

"We often tell our clients from the industry side, if they get those collaborations with the academics right in the beginning, when they are talking about biospecimens for preclinical research, then when they are ready to translate into clinical research, they already have those collaborations," said Tumilasci. "Our final vision is to, one day, offer to industry researchers a networks of expert academic biobanks, each focusing in one specific disease, to facilitate samples access, communication and collaboration between academic and industry researchers. ■

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