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Md. life sciences firm changes its structure, makes its first acquisition – and has more on tap for 2021

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Dr. Christine Dingivan has stood in the top slot at Emmes for fewer than four months. In that time, she's led the Rockville life sciences services firm through its first acquisition and split the business into two units to, she said, better position it for further growth.

And there's more to come.

The company, Dingivan said, "will greatly exceed" its 2020 pace of hiring in 2021, even with its December acquisition of Neox, a European contract research organization headquartered in Prague, for undisclosed terms. Between the employees it brought on through that purchase and demand for its services rising due to the pandemic — Emmes conducts research and clinical trials for public and private sector customers — the company swelled from roughly 650 people last fall to more than 1,000 today.

"We will easily be adding 200 or more individuals to the company, and the majority will be in the U.S," said Dingivan, president and CEO.



COURTESY EMMES

Dr. Christine Dingivan took over as president and CEO of Rockville contract research organization Emmes at the end of September.

The local company's purchase of Neox expanded its international presence into central and eastern Europe — a “completely complementary” geographical footprint, the CEO said. Emmes currently has offices in Canada and Bangalore, India, but says it has conducted clinical trials and services in 60 countries across six continents.

The 150 new workers coming on board through the acquisition “are really going to be able to bolt on and tuck in quite nicely, so it’s competitive for us,” Dingivan said. “Certainly, they have staff in countries where we have none — it’s a total additive capacity and expertise for us.”

For Neox, the agreement opens its door to U.S. customers and clinical trials for the first time. Neox’s co-founders, brothers Dr. Pavel Marek and Petr Marek, will remain with the combined company — which expects to grow its client roster further, Dingivan said. “From a sales perspective, it’s also an accelerant for us,” she added.

Neox, meanwhile, now becomes part of Emmes Biopharma, one of two new divisions Dingivan put into place in December to target and serve more biopharmaceutical clients. The company is now recruiting for a president of that group; Emmes recently promoted longtime employee Dr. Paul VanVeldhuisen to lead its other entity, Emmes Public Sector, which will focus on its work with government clients.

“We wanted to make sure we were being completely, fully compliant with everything required to be a government contractor,” she said. “So having some clear separation also helps us there.”

The changes come as Emmes continues its involvement in a clinical trial of rheumatoid arthritis drug baricitinib in combination with remdesivir, which received federal emergency use authorization in November for patients with coronavirus. More than 100 Emmes employees are involved in that work, which Dingivan said is “a huge piece of the company’s efforts” for revenue and man-hours. “It’s still a very active program for Emmes, far from over,” she said.

As for the future, she said the company is making “significant investments” in its technology, including launching a new customer relationship management system, evaluating new clinical trial systems and implementing a new safety regimen slated to launch in the first quarter of this year, Dingivan said.

“That’s an evolving and new story for Emmes, one that I’m going to be driving really hard in ‘21,” she said. She declined to disclose a specific investment amount, describing it as “meaningful, and it’s the most ever by the company.”

The business plans to charge forward with more acquisitions, both to expand geographically but also in specialty therapeutic areas within public health, such as pediatrics, Dingivan said.

“I believe very strongly that public health is not just a public sector activity with the government, but it’s also an important part of what biopharmaceutical innovation can do,” she said, citing Pfizer’s and Moderna’s Covid vaccines as examples.

“Going forward with the vaccinations starting to make their way out into the public, we’re anticipating the pressure on our business that we need to respond to will hopefully lighten a bit in 2021 and going forward,” she said. “So if we were able to do well in 2020, it really speaks to how well we are positioned for 2021 and beyond.”

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