ANIMAL HEALTH, NUTRITION & TECHNOLOGY INNOVATION

IN CONVERSATION WITH TAHNI EHRHART AND JODY EHRHARDT

RIGHT-SIZED, BY DESIGN

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In Conversation with Tahni Ehrhart, Director of Research Services, and Jody Ehrhardt, Founder and CEO, Ehrhardt Clinical Solutions

Ahead of AHNTI, where Ehrhardt Clinical Solutions will be on the show floor, we sat down with Tahni Ehrhart and Jody Ehrhardt, Director of Research Services and Founder and CEO of Ehrhardt Clinical Solutions, a mother-daughter team who built the company around a gap they saw firsthand in animal health trials, to talk about why ECS was designed to serve the studies larger CROs often overlook, and what it actually takes to get promising animal health science to market.

Tahni Ehrhart, Director of Research Services, Ehrhardt Clinical Solutions

Jody Ehrhardt, Founder and CEO, Ehrhardt Clinical Solutions

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FINDING THE NICHE

Niamh: To start, could you both describe your roles at Ehrhardt Clinical Solutions and what you do day to day?

Jody: I have multiple roles, but for ECS, I started the company in 2011. I'd worked across totally different parts of the industry before that: on the pharma side with Ceva Animal Health, and in consulting elsewhere. I've worked my way through and seen it from all the different angles. I've also worked in human health since 1996, so thirty years this October.

Tahni: I'm the Director of Research Services and oversee day-to-day operations at ECS. Mom had worked in human clinical research since the late nineties and eventually opened her own standalone human research site in the Kansas City area. At the same time, she was consulting on the animal side, and we were a small fish in a big pond of human research, frustrated by monitor turnover and redundancy. We realized there was an entire industry of vets on the animal side who needed the knowledge we'd built at site level, so we switched gears and found our niche. We're especially passionate about working with small startups, biotech, and women-led companies like ours, and helping them feel seen in an industry that isn't always easy to break into.

Niamh: How do you think about balancing scientific rigor with the practical realities of timeline and budget?

Tahni: It starts with understanding where the sponsor is coming from. Is this their first therapeutic or device? Have they worked in pharma before? Are they a microbiologist who's stumbled onto something incredible and now wants to bring it to market? All of those are great starting points. But sometimes you have to be the good cop, bad cop: I love your idea, but have you thought about how we actually get this to commercialization? Often that means telling them they're a few steps earlier in the process than they thought.

Jody: Building on what Tahni said, that's why we describe ourselves as high touch without being high overhead. Not everybody needs the full package. We figure out exactly what a sponsor needs: if you don't need B and C but desperately need D, we'll contract for D. Then if you need us again, we build on that. We have a lot of flexibility in how we work with people, no matter where they're starting from.

RIGHT-SIZED BY DESIGN

Niamh: You've intentionally positioned yourselves as a right-sized CRO for pilot studies and smaller pivotal trials, rather than competing head-on with the larger CROs. What led to that, and what does it look like day to day?

Jody: It came from seeing the same gap over and over, from the sponsor side, working with CEOs on animal trials. Not every program needs the whole package a larger CRO hands you, though we can do all of that too. But pilot studies and smaller pivotal studies still need deep experience and strong sites, which we have through our site network. Quality data and regulatory discipline matter regardless of size. What we bring is the ability to work without all the layers of infrastructure and cost that come with bigger companies. We intentionally positioned ourselves to be small enough to be flexible and highly engaged. We're not trying to avoid competing with the larger CROs, we're trying to compete differently: what do you need, what's the practical problem, and what personalized attention can we bring? We call it right-sized. It's not really a limitation of our model. It's actually our advantage.

Tahni: And we want to be affordable to the newer, smaller startups who can't afford the big CROs, so that the therapeutics and the science they're finding doesn't get lost and does get its chance to reach the commercial market. There are so many amazing things out there and so many brilliant minds finding them. But if you have to pay a million dollars for every study, we're never going to see that data come to life.

Niamh: How has the profile of your partners changed over the years?

Jody: We're seeing both ends. Because of the experience and relationships we've built, we're increasingly working with smaller biotechs and startups who come to us with an idea and don't even have a protocol fleshed out yet. They're not always sure of their endpoint. They'll say, we want this to make dogs healthier, and that's a great start, but it's not an endpoint in a clinical trial. We see a lot of interest from people who don't know where to start or what to ask a CRO. Often, rather than a big contract, they'll ask for a few hours of our time to walk through what the process should look like, what services they need, and what they can handle in-house. Then when they're ready for the bigger conversation, we can go deeper.

BRIDGING SCIENCE AND COMMERCIALIZATION

Niamh: As a woman-owned and founded CRO, how has that shaped how you've built your team and how you work with partners?

Jody: Being women-owned is something we're proud of, and we have a lot of women on our team, but we didn't intentionally build ECS around that identity. We built it around how a good CRO should operate: collaborative, accountable, responsive, willing to have the conversations people don't necessarily want to hear. We built a team around people who could bring deep expertise to the table, and it happened to become largely women-run. That's part of who we are, but the experience, the relationships, and the quality of work is what we want ECS to be known for.

Niamh: You sit right at the point where science either becomes a commercial product or stalls. What's the biggest structural gap you've seen between promising early research and something that actually reaches the market?

Tahni: I think it's twofold. First, there's incredible science out there, but people have no idea what to do with it. They get overwhelmed trying to figure out where to start, or think they can do it themselves and realize they need outside expertise, which can be expensive. So sometimes the discoveries just get lost because there's nowhere obvious for them to go. Second, and we talk about this almost weekly as a team, is sites. There are so many veterinary clinics and incredible investigators who don't know how to get into research, but sponsors want fast enrolling sites that don't need training, but we need new sites too. If we don't keep training naive sites and bringing new ones in, we're not going to be able to keep doing this. We can't keep relying on the same handful of sites for every major study.

Niamh: For the earlier-stage biotechs you work with, what do they most often get wrong about what it takes to get through clinical trials successfully?

Tahni: Timelines.

Jody: Timelines, and protocol structure. It's one thing to want to prove something works, but sponsors often forget to think about what it looks like from the veterinary practice side. Can this be wrapped into how vets actually practice medicine day to day? What burden does it put on the owner and the animal? If a trial is so different from standard of care that vets can't fit it into their practice, that's a problem before you even get to recruitment.

Tahni: That rolls straight into timelines. If what you're asking of investigators, sites, and owners is a lot, recruitment slows down. Sponsors often don't come to terms with that until it's already a problem.

WHAT SPONSORS GET WRONG

Niamh: Where do you think industry under-invests in the process between good science and commercial reality?

Jody: Veterinary sites, and what sponsors budget to pay them. What's the per-visit payment for the vet? And people don't think enough about what they're paying owners. An owner has other options, they could just buy a commercial product instead. But you're asking them to come in Tuesday, then come back next Tuesday, then run more tests, then come back again. That's a real burden nobody accounts for: gas money, time off work, finding someone to bring the pet in. And without owners, you don't have data, and you don't get approved. They're partners in bringing a product to market and should be compensated as such. If someone asked you to come in and do a job at their place of business every Tuesday for an hour, for the next six months, you'd want more than a hundred dollars or a credit for next time.

"Without owners, you don't have data, and you don't get approved."

Niamh: Companion animal health has seen a lot of investor interest recently. Has that translated into more or better-designed trials, or just more trials?

Jody: Both, honestly. There's an influx of trials, which is exciting. But because of where some of that interest is coming from, and the knowledge gap around day-to-day operations, we sometimes see protocols that just aren't well designed. We had one example where the inclusion criteria required a weight range for enrolled animals that didn't match actual weights seen in the real world. There's a lot of activity out there, but some of it needs real work before it's ready to put into practice.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

Niamh: What would you change about the animal health innovation pipeline to get promising science to market faster or more successfully?

Tahni: More visibility for the industry as a whole. The human side is so well known, for better or worse. People don't always realize animal research is happening beyond lab settings, that we're actually helping cure diseases and illnesses in companion animals. Getting that out there, and showing people it isn't something to be afraid of, it's good, it's helpful, it's needed, matters.

Jody: Agreed, and it cuts both ways. We need pet owners to know clinical trials are an option; ask me what I do for a living and

Attendees can find Tahni and Jody at the Ehrhardt Clinical Solutions booth at AHNTI, where they'll be on hand to talk through pilot study design, protocol review, or simply to compare notes on where the industry needs to invest next.