



CHARLESTON-BASED ORGANIZATION HAS HAND IN MAJOR CLINICAL RESEARCH

By Holly Fisher
Photography by Stan Foxworthy Studios

Nancy C. G. Snowden credits much of her career path to “insulting the right person at the right time.” A former oncology nurse, Snowden was running a community clinical oncology program administrated by the National Cancer Institute when she found a mistake in the protocol. It was a typo that could have turned into a serious safety issue.

Snowden pointed out the mistake to the investigator in the clinical trial, who ultimately hired Snowden and launched her career in clinical research.

“He saw something in me I didn’t know existed,” she said.

Snowden went on to work as a senior research coordinator and oncology clinical research coordinator. The researcher she had originally insulted hired her as a consultant in 1984, at which time she launched her own company, NCGS Inc. But Snowden hasn’t forgotten how she got her start. As a leader and CEO, Snowden tries to create for others the same kind of opportunities she had, giving them a nudge to discover the depth of their own self-worth.

“When I take my last breath, I want to know I helped others see that something special in themselves,” she said.

Focusing on people – whether her employees or the patients who will benefit from new medical developments – is at the heart of NCGS. Snowden and her team know the work they do has the potential to save lives.

Any new drug goes through a rigorous testing phase to determine the appropriate dose, the best method of delivery, and, of course, the safety perimeters.

“The risk-to-benefit ratio has to be there,” Snowden said. “Patient safety is always at the forefront. The first rule of medicine is ‘do no harm.’”

This is where NCGS steps in to verify processes, review data with a fine-tooth comb, and ensure patient safety. The company specializes in complicated medical issues, such as cancers, infectious disease, and pain and movement/neurologic disorders.

Large pharmaceutical companies like Pfizer and Eli Lilly, along with smaller startups, know NCGS’ reputation and commitment to excellence, so they don’t hesitate to hire NCGS as a contract research organization.

With 200 employees around the United States, including 116 consultants, NCGS sends its team to research sites to ensure proper patient selection and to capture observations. The list of side effects that come at the end of medication TV commercials or are included in a pamphlet at the doctor’s office – that’s the work of NCGS.

“We look at every single piece of data as a piece of the puzzle,” Snowden said.

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Make it personal

Pharmaceutical companies develop a large number of medical compounds, yet very few make it through the decade-long approval process. But when they do, it’s a rewarding feeling for Snowden and her team. The company has been part of 59 approved drugs.

In fact, her father was undergoing cancer treatment and was prescribed a drug Snowden’s own company had approved. That drug saved her father’s life.

That’s why Snowden urges her team to think of their “mother, brother, sister, yourself” when working on a project. Picturing the face of a loved one moves their work beyond impersonal data.

“There are millions of people whose lives we’ve touched,” Snowden said. “I’m as excited today as the first day I did it.”

A strategy for growth

Snowden’s focus on quality and hiring the best employees has fueled incredible growth. Several years ago, she embarked on a long-term strategy to diversify the company’s client base to include both big pharmaceutical companies and the smaller startups. Those startups are often acquired, giving a contract research organization like NCGS inroads with the larger company.

About half a dozen years ago, NCGS wasn’t quite a \$10 million company, but as Snowden’s strategy played out, business soon doubled – and doubled some more. NCGS is now in its second year as a \$50 million company.

Bursting at the seams, NCGS’ Charleston employees are moving from the Meeting Street headquarters into 16 Charlotte St. – a new multi-building campus for the growing company. There will be plenty of room for the 120 local employees and room to add another 80 positions. NCGS is also acquiring a European company that will double the size of the company.

While many employees can live anywhere, attracting workers in Charleston isn’t exactly tough. The area’s growing technology sector has bolstered the amount of available talent. And, it’s Charleston.

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NCGS is a good corporate citizen, supporting mostly Lowcountry nonprofits. Snowden said 10 percent of the company’s profits go to charity, largely those focused on women and at-risk children. “If God has blessed you, give back,” Snowden said.

Through her work and her charitable giving, Snowden is living out her greatest desire: to make a difference.

“On some level, we all want to know we touched another human being’s life,” she said.