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Data monitoring committees in Chinese clinical trials: institutional empowerment and the new landscape of global pharmaceutical innovation

Yuexiang Huang

Department of Biostatistics, Shanghai Henlius Biotech. Inc, Beijing 100025, China.

Correspondence to: Yuexiang Huang, Department of Biostatistics, Shanghai Henlius Biotech. Inc, Beijing 100025, China. E-mail: Yuexiang_Huang@henlius.com

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Abstract

Data Monitoring Committees (DMCs) have become an essential governance mechanism in clinical trials worldwide. China's rapid ascent in pharmaceutical innovation with clinical trial volumes surpassing those of the United States and unprecedented growth in drug licensing activity, has occurred in parallel with the systematic institutionalization of DMCs. This paper examines the evolution of DMC regulation in China, from the foundational guidance of 2020 through the scheduled adoption of ICH E6(R3) in April 2026, and argues that DMC development has served not merely as a compliance exercise but as a strategic enabler of quality improvement, international integration and innovation acceleration. Drawing on an institutional empowerment framework, the analysis demonstrates that China's DMC development has coincided with measurable quality improvements: FDA inspection data show an increase in favorable outcomes from 43% (2009-2015) to 88% (2016-2022). DMC utilisation has grown steadily since 2020, and out-licensing transactions reached approximately US$140 billion in 2025, with China surpassing the United States for the first time. While challenges remain, including expanding DMC utilisation to broader trial types, systematizing training, and enhancing transparency, these represent opportunities for continued institutional deepening. The Chinese experience offers valuable lessons for other emerging economies seeking to upgrade their clinical trial governance.

Keywords: Data Monitoring Committee, clinical trial regulation, institutional empowerment, pharmaceutical innovation China, internationalization, quality assurance

INTRODUCTION

Data Monitoring Committees (DMCs) have been an established feature of major clinical trials for nearly four decades[1-3]. Originally developed for long-term, high-risk studies with mortality or major morbidity endpoints, DMCs now oversee a broad spectrum of clinical research, including adaptive designs and early-phase innovative drug studies[3-5]. Their core role remains unchanged: to conduct independent interim analyses of safety and efficacy data, to evaluate the accumulating risk-benefit profile of the investigational intervention, and to provide recommendations to the sponsor regarding continuation, modification or termination of the trial[6].

In the mature regulatory systems of the United States and the European Union, the principles of DMC operation, independence from the sponsor, systematic conflict-of-interest management, transparent operating procedures and rigorous interim analysis standards, have been progressively codified. The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued its first comprehensive DMC guidance in 2001 and updated it in 2006[4], while the European Medicines Agency has maintained a dedicated guideline since 2005[7]. These regulatory frameworks have shaped the expectations of sponsors, investigators and regulators worldwide, and have become the de facto benchmark against which DMC practices in emerging markets are evaluated.

Against this backdrop, China's trajectory of DMC institutionalization is a story of remarkable acceleration. The country has emerged as a global powerhouse in pharmaceutical research and development. In 2025, innovative-drug clinical trials conducted in China numbered 2,502, which was approximately 1.5 times the number in the United States and accounted for 48% of the global total for that year[8,9]. The total volume of registered clinical trials in China grew from 3,279 in 2021 to 5,210 in 2025, representing a five-year compound annual growth rate of 12.27%[9]. Simultaneously, China has transformed from a net importer of pharmaceutical intellectual property into a major originator of drug assets. In 2025, out-licensing transactions for Chinese innovative drugs reached an estimated total deal value of US$140 billion, which represented 49% of global licensing deals and surpassed the United States for the first time.

This transformation has created unprecedented demand for clinical trial governance mechanisms that meet international standards, and DMCs have risen to meet that demand. This paper examines China's pathway of DMC development from initial policy frameworks to mature institutional practice, and argues that the systematic adoption of DMCs has served not merely as a compliance exercise, but as a strategic enabler of quality improvement and international integration. We introduce the concept of institutional empowerment to capture this process, through which regulatory infrastructure becomes an active driver of innovation and global competitiveness[10-14].

THE REGULATORY ARCHITECTURE OF DMCS: A TRILATERAL COMPARISON

The United States: pioneering DMC regulation

The US FDA has been a global leader in DMC regulation. The 2006 final guidance, "The Establishment and Operation of Clinical Trial Data Monitoring Committees," provided the foundational framework, emphasizing DMC use in trials where subjects are at risk of serious morbidity or mortality and requiring independence from the sponsor[4]. As DMC adoption expanded significantly over two decades, the 2006 guidance required updating.

In February 2024, FDA issued a draft guidance entitled "Use of Data Monitoring Committees in Clinical Trials," representing the first update since 2006[6]. The draft guidance introduced key improvements, including expanded scope of application, integration of innovative trial designs, detailed charter requirements, and recognition of globalization trends[14]. Compared to 2006, FDA now acknowledges

Table 1. Key comparative overview of DMC regulatory frameworks

Dimension	United States	European Union	China
Regulatory framework	FDA 2006 (final), 2024 (draft)[4, 6]	EMA 2005, 2018 Q&A supplement[7, 15]	CDE 2020, ICH E6(R3) 2026[13, 16-18]
DMC utilization trend	Significantly expanded since 2006; broader and more complex DMC responsibilities[6]	EMA has recommended DMC use across all trial phases[7]	Rapid growth since 2020; 23.04% in paediatric trials, 19.14% in oncology trials[19-22]
Primary drivers	Patient safety, trial integrity	Product lifecycle oversight	Compliance, market demand (out-licensing boom)
International alignment	Global benchmark	ICH-aligned	Rapid convergence to align with ICH

DMC: Data Monitoring Committee; FDA: Food and Drug Administration.

DMCs are "increasingly utilized in a wider variety of study types, including moderately sized trials, multiregional clinical trials, early phase trials in serious conditions, and trials for rare diseases and vulnerable populations"[6]. The guidance also addresses the role of DMCs in implementing adaptive trial designs, overseeing entire drug development programs, and reviewing aggregate data for IND safety reporting. FDA further clarified that DMCs "should have access to safety data as well as efficacy data" to make fully informed risk-benefit assessments[6].

European Union: a complementary framework

The European Medicines Agency issued its "Guideline on Data Monitoring Committees" (EMA/CHMP/EWP/5872/03) in July 2005, which remains in effect[7]. The EMA framework shares core principles with FDA but places unique emphasis on DMCs throughout the product lifecycle. A 2018 Q&A document clarified DMC roles across different drug development phases, including postmarketing settings[15]. The EMA guideline defines a DMC as "a group of independent experts external to a study assessing the progress, safety data and, if needed, critical efficacy endpoints of a clinical study, " and provides specific recommendations on DMC composition, statistical considerations, and communication with regulatory authorities[7].

China: accelerated institutionalization

China's regulatory development began later but has progressed rapidly. In September 2020, the Center for Drug Evaluation (CDE) issued the "Guidelines for Data Monitoring Committees in Clinical Trials (Trial Implementation)," establishing the foundational framework[16]. In 2025, the China Food and Drug Inspection Institute (CFDI) released updated "Guidelines for Phase I Clinical Trial Management," mandating that high-risk trials including first-in-human studies, establish independent DMCs[17]. A further milestone is scheduled for April 2026, when ICH E6(R3) is set to formally take effect in China, marking full alignment with globally harmonised clinical trial quality standards[13]. Unlike FDA or EMA guidance, which have remained static for nearly two decades, China's regulatory evolution from flexible guidance (2020) to targeted mandates (2025) to full ICH convergence (2026), has been highly compressed. Furthermore, the CDE issued a guideline on benefit-risk assessment using multi-regional clinical trial (MRCT) data in February 2026, encouraging international multi-centre trials including Chinese sites and reinforcing DMCs as quality assurance mechanisms for globally accepted data[18].

Comparative table

The trilateral comparision points among the three regulation authorities are summarized in Table 1.

DMC UTILISATION AND CAPABILITY BUILDING IN CHINA

Growth trends and application patterns

Empirical studies of DMC utilisation in China have documented a pattern of increasing adoption since 2018, with 2020 as a clear inflection point[19-22]. An analysis of DMC application in Chinese paediatric drug development, based on 612 clinical trials, found a strong and sustained growth trend in DMC adoption since 2018; the overall DMC application rate in paediatric trials was 23.04%, with a marked gap between international (70.80%) and domestic (8.89%) trials[19]. Similar patterns have been reported in oncology drug development, where among 5,320 registered trials, the DMC adoption rate was 19.14%, rising to 56.46% for Phase III studies[21]. Notably, DMC implementation in China is not confined to conventional pharmaceutical trials; the framework has been progressively integrated into traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) clinical research, where specialised Chinese Medicine Data Monitoring Committees (CMDMCs) have been established[22,23].

Practical implementation and professional capacity

Documented case examples illustrate the substantive role that DMCs have come to play in Chinese clinical research. One notable instance is the Phase IV clinical trial of Danhong injection for stable coronary atherosclerotic heart disease, which has been presented as a complete CMDMC practice case demonstrating how DMC principles can be adapted to TCM while preserving core oversight functions[22]. Another instructive case is the clopidogrel and aspirin trial for acute ischaemic stroke and high-risk transient ischaemic attack, where a published practice analysis systematically examined the DMC's responsibilities and operational protocols[22]. Beyond individual trial cases, professional service providers have accumulated substantial experience; one provider reported executing over 600 Phase I-III clinical trials, including more than 120 pivotal registration trials, while organsing and participating in dozens of DMC services across key therapeutic areas. Capacity building has also been advanced through professional education, including annual academic conferences and the publication of a comprehensive textbook on DMCs in TCM clinical research[22].

DMCS AS A DRIVER OF QUALITY AND INTERNATIONAL INTEGRATION

Quality signaling and regulatory trust

One of the most tangible outcomes of China's DMC institutionalization has been the improvement in objective quality metrics. An analysis by Chen *et al.* (2025) documented that the proportion of Chinese clinical trial sites receiving "No Action Indicated" (NAI), the most favorable FDA inspection outcome, increased from 43% during the 2009-2015 period to 88% during the 2016-2022 period[23]. Over the same period, the proportion of sites receiving "Official Action Indicated" (OAI) fell from 9% to 0%[23].

It is important to note that this improvement began before the 2020 DMC guidance was issued. The available data do not allow a precise breakdown of the trend between 2016-2019 *vs.* 2020-2022. Therefore, while the quality gains coincided with the broader period of DMC institutionalization, we cannot attribute them solely to DMC adoption. Other ongoing regulatory reforms in China such as strengthened site training, stricter sponsor oversight, and enhanced data integrity requirements, almost certainly contributed as well. Consequently, we present the association as a temporal coincidence rather than a causal claim. For international regulators and partners, the presence of a properly functioning DMC nevertheless serves as a credible signal that trial conduct meets global standards[12].

Network integration and global licensing

The integration of Chinese clinical research into the global drug development network is perhaps the most strategically significant outcome of DMC institutionalisation. China's alignment with international DMC

standards, culminating in the scheduled adoption of ICH E6(R3), has substantially reduced barriers to participation in global clinical development[16-18]. The results are visible in China's out-licensing boom: in 2025, Chinese innovative drug out-licensing transactions reached approximately US$140 billion, representing 49% of global licensing deals surpassing the United States for the first time. This activity both depends on and reinforces DMC development. International partners acquiring Chinese-developed drug assets require assurance that the clinical trial data were generated according to international quality standards; the presence of a properly functioning DMC provides such assurance. Conversely, revenue from successful licensing transactions provides resources for sponsors to invest in even higher-quality trial conduct, including DMC implementation. This virtuous cycle exemplifies the concept of institutional empowerment[12,13].

REMAINING CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEEPENING

Despite these achievements, the ongoing maturation of China's DMC ecosystem presents opportunities for continued development. These challenges should be understood not as deficiencies but as natural focal points for the next phase of institutional deepening.

Expanding DMC utilisation across trial types. While DMC adoption is strong in registration-focused pivotal trials, extension to investigator-initiated trials, earlier-phase studies, real-world evidence studies, and post-marketing surveillance would further strengthen China' s clinical research infrastructure.

Standardizing DMC training and certification. As trial volume increases, demand for qualified DMC members, including clinicians, biostatisticians, and other experts, grows accordingly. Development of formal training programmes and credentialing mechanisms would help ensure that qualified personnel keep pace with utilisation[5,24].

Enhancing transparency and knowledge sharing. Public documentation of DMC operations and decision-making while protecting patient privacy and commercial confidentiality, would facilitate learning across the clinical research community[24].

Addressing emerging methodological challenges. As clinical trials incorporate adaptive designs, biomarker-based patient selection, digital health technologies, and novel endpoints, DMC oversight must adapt accordingly. Developing DMC approaches appropriate for these novel designs while maintaining core principles represents an ongoing methodological frontier[6,20].

CONCLUSIONS

The development of DMCs in China over the past six years represents a notable achievement in clinical trial governance, one best understood through the lens of institutional empowerment. From the foundational 2020 guidelines to the scheduled adoption of ICH E6(R3) in April 2026, China has built a comprehensive regulatory framework that supports DMC implementation and aligns with international standards[16-18].

The practical impact extends beyond regulatory compliance to encompass quality improvement and international integration. Chen *et al.* (2025) provide objective evidence of quality enhancement, documenting FDA inspection outcomes improving from 43% to 88% NAI during the same period when DMCs were being systematically implemented[23]. However, as noted in Section **Quality signaling and regulatory trust**, this temporal association does not establish causation; other regulatory reforms likely also played important roles. The dramatic growth of Chinese out-licensing activity both reflects and is supported by the quality-assurance infrastructure that DMC implementation helps provide.

China's pathway phased regulatory implementation, alignment of regulatory push with market demand, and leverage of ecosystem scale, offers valuable lessons for other emerging economies seeking to upgrade their clinical trial governance. For countries with rapidly expanding clinical research sectors, China's experience demonstrates that systematic DMC institutionalisation can be achieved within a relatively compressed timeframe through deliberate policy design, progressive implementation, and strategic alignment with broader pharmaceutical innovation goals. Remaining challenges, expanding DMC utilisation to a broader range of trial types, developing standardised training programmes, enhancing transparency, and adapting to emerging methodological complexity, represent the natural agenda for the next phase of institutional deepening. As China continues to expand its role in global pharmaceutical development, the institutional empowerment of DMCs provides a foundation for sustained progress, moving from rapid catch-up toward leadership in clinical trial governance.

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The author contributed solely to this article.

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