Zhanar Mustapova

- **Current Role**: Study Start Up Associate I
- **STAR Programme**: Junior Clinical Researcher
- **Programme Year**: 2024-2025

‘How Zhanar Launched Her Clinical Research Career with ECCRT’s STAR Programme’

Before the STAR Programme

Before joining the ECCRT STAR Programme, I built a solid scientific and operational foundation through more than a decade of experience in biomedical research and clinical laboratory management.

Academically, I hold a Master of Science in Biotechnological Sciences and after graduation I began my career as a Junior Researcher at the Center for Life Sciences in Central Asia, where I contributed to pre-clinical oncology studies, developed a biobank for cancer stem cells, and gained hands-on expertise with key laboratory techniques such as PCR, flow cytometry, and cell viability assays. Within the framework of my project I worked in collaboration with University of Pittsburgh (UPitt) in Pennsylvania, USA. Due to this, I had several short term placements to perform particular phases of the study at UPitt laboratories.

The exposure to the international environment allowed me to appreciate the different points of view and develop a flexible mind. This role also strengthened my analytical skills and deepened my understanding of experimental design, data quality, and scientific reporting.

I later advanced to the position of Senior Clinical Laboratory Coordinator at the School of Medicine, where I managed laboratory operations within a BSL2 clinical environment. My responsibilities included procurement and maintenance of medical equipment, vendor contract negotiations, budget oversight, and development of SOPs in alignment with GLP and regulatory standards.

Also, I coordinated bio sample handling and ensured compliance with quality assurance and biosafety requirements. This experience allowed me to develop strong organizational, leadership, and regulatory compliance skills while working closely with laboratory personnel and external partners.

Why ECCRT?

With a professional background rooted in biotechnology, pre-clinical oncology research, and clinical laboratory coordination, I developed a deep understanding of scientific methodology, regulatory standards, and quality-driven laboratory operations. Over the years, my roles exposed me to essential elements of the clinical development process—such as biosample handling, GLP compliance, equipment validation, and data integrity—but I increasingly felt motivated to move closer to the operational and patient-focused side of clinical research.

The ECCRT Junior Clinical Researcher STAR Programme offered the ideal pathway to make this transition. It provided a structured, industry-recognized training framework that bridges scientific expertise with the practical competencies required in clinical trial management. The programme's combination of theoretical learning and hands-on experience aligned perfectly with my goal of expanding beyond laboratory-based work and gaining direct exposure to site management, regulatory processes, and clinical trial execution.

I chose ECCRT specifically because of its strong reputation in Europe, its close collaboration with leading pharmaceutical companies, and its focus on preparing junior professionals for real-world clinical research responsibilities

Experience During the Programme

At the start of the ECCRT Junior CRA STAR Programme, I completed an intensive week of theoretical training covering ICH GCP, clinical trial methodology, monitoring principles, regulatory frameworks, safety reporting, and essential documentation processes. This foundation prepared me to transition smoothly into hands-on clinical research activities during my internships.

My first placement took place at CU Saint-Luc in Brussels, where I worked as a Clinical Trial Coordinator. In this role, I supported the daily conduct of clinical trials at site level, including investigational product accountability, preparation and maintenance of source documents, Investigator Master Files (IMFs), and Case Report Forms (CRFs). I assisted CRAs during monitoring visits, helped train study personnel, and demonstrated the correct use of study tools. I contributed to the development of Informed Consent Forms (ICFs) and ensured compliance with ICH GCP throughout all activities.

I also communicated with trial participants via phone, email, and post to support data collection and follow-up procedures. This experience strengthened my understanding of site operations and the practical challenges of trial execution.

My second internship was at Eli Lilly Benelux, where I worked across the Trial Capabilities Centre (TCC) and the Investigator Engagement team. Within TCC, I contributed to study start-up and enrolment readiness activities, including regulatory document preparation, Clinical Trial Application submissions under the EU CTR, and quality checks of essential documents. I gained hands-on experience with key clinical systems such as Vault Clinical, e-CTS (IWRS), and the Shared Investigator Platform (SIP).

I also supported inspection readiness, managed translations, and assisted with responses to Ethics Committee RFIs.

In the Investigator Engagement team, I participated in study feasibility assessments, site selection activities, and investigator engagement initiatives. I joined CRAs during Site Initiation Meetings (SIMs), remote monitoring activities, and study close-out procedures. I also became familiar with EU CTR regulatory requirements, CT-College templates, and BAREC recommendations, developing subject-matter expertise in this area.

Across both placements, I gained a comprehensive understanding of the clinical trial lifecycle—from site-level coordination to sponsor-side operational oversight. The programme allowed me to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings, develop strong technical and regulatory skills, and build confidence in supporting clinical research activities across multiple stakeholders.

Where Are You Now?

After completing the ECCRT Junior Clinical Researcher STAR Programme and gaining hands-on experience at both CU Saint-Luc and Eli Lilly Benelux, I have now transitioned into my first industry role as a Study Start-Up Associate I at ICON Plc, working on behalf of Eli Lilly. This position represents a direct continuation of the skills and knowledge I developed throughout the programme—particularly in EU CTR submissions, regulatory document preparation, study start up, site activation, and cross-functional collaboration.

The STAR Programme provided the theoretical foundation and practical exposure needed to step confidently into a sponsor-facing operational role, while my internships allowed me to understand the realities of clinical trial execution from both the site and sponsor perspectives.

Joining ICON Plc is a natural next step in my professional development, allowing me to apply what I learned, deepen my expertise in study start-up, and contribute meaningfully to the delivery of high-quality clinical research.

Final Word of Advice

If I could give one piece of advice to future joiners of the ECCRT STAR Programme, it would be to embrace the learning curve with confidence. The programme is intense, but it gives you exactly what you need to step into the clinical research world with a strong foundation. Make the most of the theoretical week at the beginning — it sets the tone for everything that follows and helps you understand how the different pieces of a clinical trial fit together.

During your internships, stay curious and proactive. Ask questions, volunteer for tasks, and don't be afraid to step outside your comfort zone. The more you engage with study teams, and site staff, the more you'll understand the realities of clinical operations. Every task, even the small ones, teaches you something valuable.

Most importantly, trust the process. The programme is designed to help you grow quickly, and the skills you gain — from regulatory knowledge to communication and problem-solving — will open doors. I'm now working as a Study Start-Up Associate I at ICON Plc on behalf of Eli Lilly, and I can say with certainty that the STAR Programme played a key role in helping me reach this point. If you stay motivated and take ownership of your development, you'll come out of the programme ready for your first role in the industry.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Virginie Hamtiaux. Her professionalism and tailored guidance played an important role in shaping the decisions I made throughout the programme.