

India's biotech innovators need some help

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Narayanansureshgroupedn More than two decades ago, India's health administrators, nudged by civil society and concerned scientists, embarked on a national mission to eradicate the dreaded polio disease that crippled millions of young lives every year. A large number of public and private vaccine manufacturers stepped in to make the polio vaccines available in plenty at reasonable costs.

Thanks to a multi-pronged strategy, India has been declared "polio-free" as not a single case of polio occurred in the country in 2011. If this situation continues for two more years, polio will join the list of diseases eradicated in the country. The polio eradication taught the nation and its vaccine industry many things. Thanks to generous support from Rotary International and other international voluntary and UN agencies, Indian companies got the know how to build polio and other vaccines.

The seed sown by this initiative has led to the emergence of a thriving vaccine sector in India. In fact, belying all expectations, India's vaccine industry has become a leader in global supply of many critical vaccines. As pointed out by Dr M K Bhan, secretary, Department of Biotechnology (DBT), recently, India today supplies more than half of the world's pediatric vaccines to the global supply system, run by UN agencies. Can the nation build on the momentum and continue to innovate in the healthcare space? Can India's innovators continue to learn from international best practices that reached the country through collaborative arrangements?

Some recent developments appear to throw a spanner in the drug innovation ecosystem. Companies in the clinical trial sector have been complaining about the slow regulatory process that has come in place in the light of malpractices by a few players in recent years, affecting the entire industry. New clinical trial approvals are taking more than 18 months and there is a sense of despondency building up in the industry.

Such a situation has long term consequences because the decade-old clinical trial industry in the country has played a key role in stimulating the drug innovation system in the country indirectly. The elaborate protocols followed by global companies who used India as a site for their clinical trials have transferred a lot of expertise to Indian professionals. This may soon come to a stop.

The chief of world's largest clinical trial company, Quintiles has indicated that the company's future projects will move to China to ensure business process continuity, affected in India by the delayed regulatory process. In fact, Quintiles' global CEO Dennis Gillings during his recent India visit has appealed to the Indian government to look at the industry for its overall beneficial effect. There is a merit in his argument. What is the point in tarring a whole industry for the faults of a few errant companies.

After all, despite widespread complaints about the safety standards of two of the country's leading airlines, the entire civil aviation industry has not been made the scapegoat and stymied by regulators. Why should clinical trial sector be treated differently?

It is not all gloomy though for the industry. Three bioscience leaders - Dr Swati Piramal of Piramal Life Sciences, Mumbai, Dr V Mohan of M V Diabetes Research Center, Chennai, and Dr V S Chauhan of ICGEB, New Delhi, have been conferred the national civilian award, the Padma Shri, by the government this year. Our industry should be honored by this gesture whereas not a software or communication industry representative made it to the Padma Awards list this year.

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