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Researchers to the fore in BioSpectrum Awards

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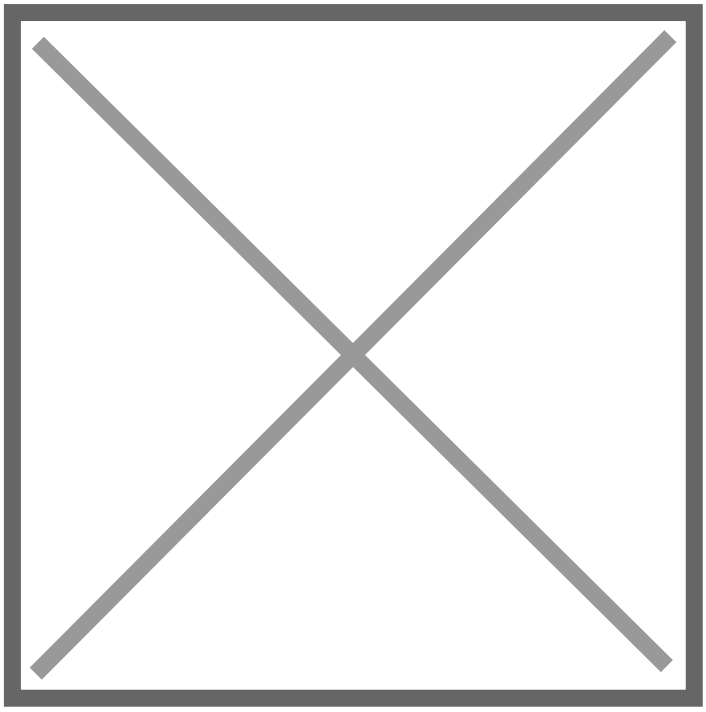

NsureshLast month, we provided some glimpses into the selection process for the annual BioSpectrum Awards. The suspense is over and as usual the December issue of BioSpectrum is devoted to the coverage of the high achievers of the Indian biotech sector.

There is something special this time apart from the newly instituted award that recognizes the best public private partnership (PPP) in the biotech ecosystem. This year's awards are dominated by highly accomplished researchers. And more interestingly, two research teams that are working hard to minimize the impact of malaria, one of the earliest scourges of human civilization, which has eluded a fool-proof cure so far.

Topping the list is the quiet and unassuming Lalji Singh who received the 9th BioSpectrum Lifetime Achievement Award 2011 for his pioneering work in introducing the DNA fingerprinting technique to the nation. Lalji, as he is affectionately called by everyone in the biotech community, has just completed his 11-year-stint as the director of the Center for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Hyderabad. This is the culmination of nearly four decades of outstanding work as a geneticist both in India and abroad. Good scientists never retire and so Lalji is moving on to take up even greater responsibilities as the vice-chancellor of Banaras Hindu University, his alma mater and also one of the country's oldest and prestigious educational institutions. Today DNA fingerprinting has become a routine process in untangling many complex civil and criminal cases. It was Lalji who single-handedly championed this technology's cause for over two decades.

The jury made a slight departure and decided to name both Dr Virander S Chauhan and Dr Chetan Chitnis, from ICGEB, New Delhi, as the BioSpectrum Persons of the Year 2011. This is for the first time that there is a joint winner for the BioSpectrum Awards category. Why the jury found it difficult to separate their work is something I am not going to explain. Their profile is self-explanatory. The entire scientific world is viewing with interest the duo's latest discoveries about the malarial parasite, which may eventually lead to the development of a vaccine to prevent the occurrence of this disease which claims millions of lives every year on our planet. As Dr G Padmanaban observed: Ã¢â?¬Å?... They are the only group in the country to have embarked on developing vaccines against falciparum and vivax malaria, which has been an international challenge for decades.Ã¢â?¬?

While the ICGEB scientists are developing a preventive vaccine, the first PPP awardees- Dr M Z Abdin of Hamdard University, New Delhi and Dr D C Jain of Ipca Labs, Mumbai - have done some great work to enhance the availability of key ingredient used in malaria treatment drugs and hence make it more affordable and accessible to the world's poorest people.

The BioSpectrum Entrepreneur of the Year, Supreet Deshpande, founder of VLife Sciences, Pune, is a die-hard entrepreneur who ventured into the life sciences field from his core expertise in the telecom sector, just for the love of it. The company's unique business model has got the thumbs up from some of the country's most hard-nosed venture capitalists. And Deshpande's small team has returned the compliments in a big way by developing a strong pipeline of eight drug candidates in a very short time.

Panacea Biotec's PacliALL, the highly talked about breast cancer treatment drug, is a path breaker in the use of nanotechnologies to make the treatment more affordable and minimize side-effects.

The details of the award ceremony, slated for 16th December in Bangalore, are given in the magazine. Please come in large numbers to cheer these outstanding achievers who are making the biotech community proud.

Narayanan Suresh
Chief Editor
sureshn@cybermedia.co.in