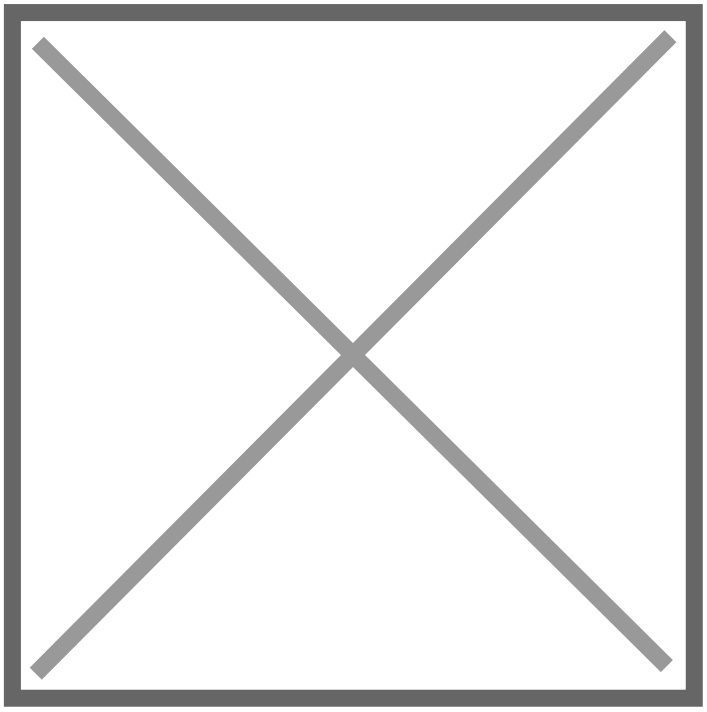
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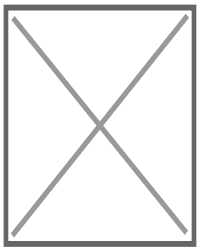
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# Public funds spur innovation in Indian biotech

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In the euphoria generated among the middle classes by the anti-corruption movement led by a Ã¢â?¬Å?Gandhian-in-the-makingÃ¢â?¬? Anna Hazare, the government and its activities have become the focus of widespread criticism. In fact, if one goes by the tone of the general public discourse, it is clear that this over-arching entity called the government cannot get anything right.

Is it really so? Can't governments get anything right? Are all government initiatives doomed to fail?

Just consider three case studies presented in the November issue of BioSpectrum under the Public Private Partnership (PPP) series. Affordable healthcare is a priority area for fund allocation by the government's Department of Biotechnology (DBT). So, when Delhi-based Amar Immunodiagnostics applied for funds to develop kits to diagnose all autoimmune diseases, the DBT officials advised the company to focus on some key diseases. The company got a grant of 13 lakh in April 2011 and on the DBT's advise has developed a kit to quickly diagnose Celiac disease, a rare category of autoimmune disorder associated with tissue trans glutaminase. In just six months, the company has developed a kit that is now undergoing final quality tests. The experience has been so valuable that now the company is confident of developing kits against a wide range of autoimmune diseases. Can anyone find fault with the advise given by the government representatives?

In the second case, Chennai-based Tergene Biotech got a grant of just 15 lakh from DBT in November 2010 to make affordable pneumococcal conjugate vaccine. In less than a year, the task has been accomplished successfully and the company is now setting up, on its own, a manufacturing facility which will be operational by mid-2013. The India-made vaccine is expected to be sold at one-third of the imported vaccine which costs nearly 3,800 per dose. Infants need four doses of this vaccine to get protection against the pneumococcal infection.

The third case is even more interesting. Ganit Labs, a not-for-profit company has been supported by the Government of Karnataka, its agencies and a private company, Strand Life Sciences. Ganit started operations in February 2011, and in September, it unveiled the complete genome of neem, a highly useful plant widely grown in India. And the entire data has been instantly made available for use by scientific community around the world. The information gained from the sequencing data will be very useful to make more studies related to one of its most useful compound, azadirachtin, and other compounds for their medicinal and pesticidal properties.

These three case studies indicate that the officials were acting in the long-term public interest and were even prepared to face flak if the projects ended in failure. All the three had succeeded. Imagine the criticism the official would face from auditors if any of these projects had not delivered and motives attributed to the support to such technology development projects in the private sector.

Even in the home of free market economy, the government continues to spend billions of dollars for technology development.

Some estimates state that nearly half the technologies that reach the markets are developed initially using the US government funds.

We, at BioSpectrum, are adding our bit by recognizing the best such efforts through the PPP mode in the biotech sector during the annual BioSpectrum Awards program in December. The details will reach you later this month.

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