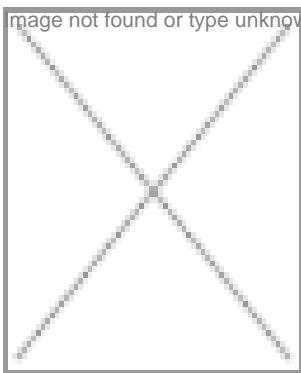


India's biotech brands make a splash

09 May 2011 | News



In the mid-1990s, one of India's current biotech icons was a dejected man. He had just exited a joint venture with his friend in Hyderabad, which was supplying some high tech equipments to the country's armed forces. To get over the gloom he went on a vacation to the Silicon Valley in the US. He attended a conference on recombinant vaccines.

This got him interested and he tried to talk to the leading biotech company in the San Francisco Bay Area to license the rDNA technology. The company's managers ridiculed him for even thinking about making such high tech products in India. However, Mr Varaprasad Rao did not take the slight easily, came back to India, enlisted the help of scientists at the Center for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB), Hyderabad. In 1997, his company, Shantha Biotechnics launched the first India-made hepatitis-B vaccine, much to the amazement of the world.

India's biotech entrepreneurs have not looked back since then. From a country which imported all its modern biological drugs, India is now a net exporter of these products.

The May 2011 BioSpectrum cover story, "Biotech Drugs: The Wave Arrives" is a tribute to the long and difficult journey made by a set of intrepid entrepreneurs against all odds. They went about their mission to make the world sit up and notice them in a methodical manner.

Currently, India's regulators have approved the use of 20 recombinant DNA products in the domestic market. There are 15 Indian companies manufacturing these. The surpluses are exported to over 100 countries. The world doubted India's ability to make rDNA products. But now, more than half of the global requirement for hepatitis-B vaccine is supplied by a handful of

Indian biotech companies. The best is yet to come. There are 72 products in the pipeline.

While we rejoice at this Indian success story, the biotech industry, globally, has provided yet another breakthrough to treat hepatitis-C, caused by contaminated blood. The US regulator, FDA has almost approved, as I write this editorial in late April, Boceprevir, the hepatitis-C drug from Merck & Co. This advanced drug, called as protease inhibitor, produces an enzyme that blocks the replication of the hepatitis-C virus and thus controls its spread. Merck's drug is expected to improve treatment efficiency by more than 30 percent and also cut down the medication time from the current one-year regiment to a few months. The US regulator is also likely to approve a similar hepatitis-C drug, Telaprevir from Vertex Pharmaceuticals.

Millions of people die every year due to hepatitis-C infection and the numbers are more in developing nations. The drug could be soon available in India too.

There is some more good news. After two years of lull, India's life science companies are heading to the financial market with their initial public offering (IPO). Three companies, Intas Pharma, Arch Pharmalabs and Calyx Chemicals, have filed their red herring prospectus with the regulator, paving the way for the public offering. This indicates the confidence of the industry as well a shift in investor interest away from the traditional sectors. Many biotech companies could benefit from the investor interest as they could use the current positive investment climate to raise resources for boosting their research and manufacturing capabilities.

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