

## “We plan to expand to the SAARC / ASEAN nations”

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The only start-up from India working to replace carcinogenic and mutagenic SYBR dyes widely used in research use only (RUO) and diagnostics reagents, Bengaluru-based Azooka Labs has revealed its first range of novel COVID-19 diagnostics products in the form of RNA Wrapp. It is a molecular transport medium for COVID-19 sample collection, developed as part of the COVID-19 response team from Indian Institute of Science (IISc). Priced at Rs 99 in India, this product has been developed to help the diagnostic centres upgrade from viral transport media (VTM) to molecular transport media (MTM). To find out more about this innovation, BioSpectrum interacted with Alex D Paul, Chief Executive Officer, Azooka Labs, Bengaluru, India.



Edited Excerpts-

**What is the current production capacity of RNA Wrapr? Will Azooka be bringing on board other partners to scale-up production and commercialisation?**

We can produce up to one lakh units in a month at our in-house manufacturing unit. We are in line to partner with large scale manufacturing units and distributors in India to scale up. We believe that partnership is essential at a critical time like the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to reach out to a wider user base. Azooka has teamed up with InDx: Indigenization of Diagnostics platform. It is a government's programme anchored by the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Platforms (C-CAMP). We have also teamed up with IISc as part of the COVID-19 response team for India point-of-care-test-for-mass-surveillance-at-public-transit-systems. We look forward to partner with distributors and manufacturers in the diagnostics domain.

**What other products are in the pipeline given the criticality of current times?**

Azooka is developing a saliva based-rapid diagnostic test kit for mass surveillance transit points like airports and train stations. It's slated to be released by February 2021. Indigenous kits like RNA Wrapr can help the nation in the battle against COVID-19.

**Are the test kits being exported to other nations as of now? What has been the response and the bottlenecks that need to be addressed?**

Currently, Azooka caters to the Indian market. We plan to expand to other developing countries such as the SAARC / ASEAN nations since we developed the product to ease-out the difficulties faced due to lack of resources in Low and Middle-Income countries. For example, the traditional (viral) transport mediums require to be refrigerated while transportation from the collection points to the testing centres. However, the samples stored in RNA Wrapr does not require refrigeration for transport. This can reduce the cost on logistics and storage. Azooka plans to enter the APAC market through partners with \$9 and \$6 pricing plans per test.

**Over the last one year, there has been a monumental rise in start-ups stepping up to help India help combat COVID-19. What are your views on this?**

The pandemic is a monumental problem that we face as humanity and start-ups are rising up to address that situation. As it is clear that no one company can address all the issues, it requires an ecosystem to address the problems from different angles with great agility and speed. There are a lot of COVID-19 challenges and contests to bring start-ups and solutions to market faster as the situation demands it.

**How do you foresee changes in the investment scenario for start-ups in the post COVID-19 era?**

In the pre-COVID-19 era investors were focused on apps, games, and e-commerce-based start-ups with India becoming the fastest growing market. With COVID-19 levelling the field for biotech start-ups with life-saving products and inventions. Post COVID-19 investors will have a new outlook on essentials and healthcare. Markets will find new favourites with biotech unicorns, as health will take priority over lifestyle and entertainment.

**Prabhat Prakash**

*prabhat.prakash@mmactiv.com*