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Good show!

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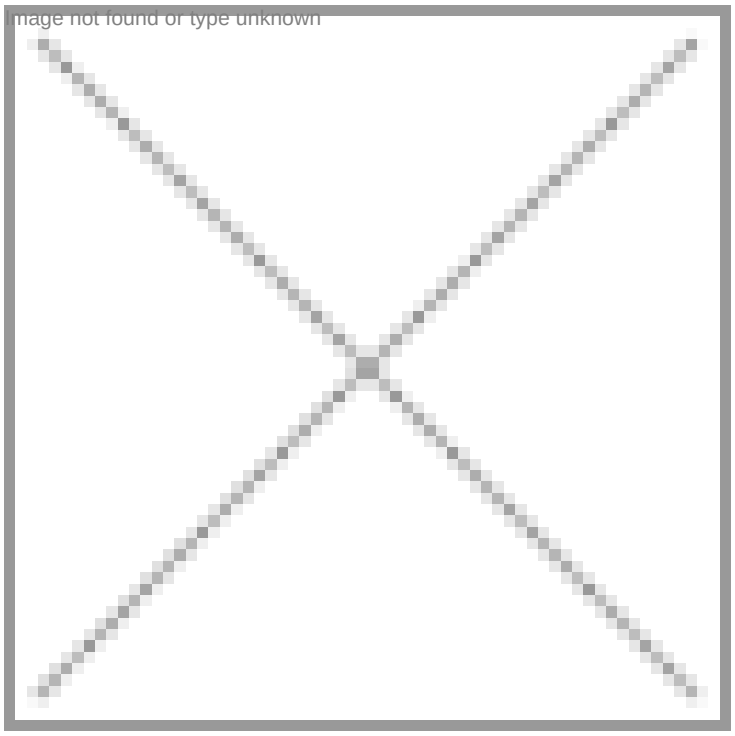

Good show!
In spite of slowdown and swine flu scare

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The ninth edition of Bangalore BIO, India's biggest biotechnology show hit the right cord with its theme "Biotechnology Beyond Boundaries—the Promise of India."

The three-day event (June18-20, 2009) comprised Multi-Track Conferences, International Trade Show, BioPartnering, CEO Conclave, Bio IP Zone, Bio Excellence Award and a host of other events. The objective clearly was to promote entrepreneurship.

Bangalore BIO continued its growth track in spite of various challenges due to the global economic slowdown. This yearmore than 700 delegates from across the globe participated in the six focused tracks and 22 conference sessions. More than 100 Indian and international speakers participated in these conference sessions.

The event also witnessed over 400 biotech, pharma and biosupplier companies exploring business opportunities. The 2009 exhibition attracted over 110 national and international organizations showcasing their innovation. There were 15 organizations from Germany, apart from exhibitors from UK, Australia, Singapore, France, Spain, Italy, Holland, US, Canada, Cuba, Malaysia, Japan, Iran and UAE.

BioPartnering, the first of its kind initiative by the event organizers and Technology Vision Group (TVG), of the Governmentof Karnataka got a resounding response. More than 400 business meetings were conducted through this initiative.

The show was inaugurated by Prithviraj Chavan, India's newly-appointed minister of science and technology, who took charge in May 2009.

He came. He saw. He inspired.

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D ate" addressed the plenary session at Bangalore BIO 2009—India's largest biotech show. His anecdote-filled talk essentially showcased the potential of biotech to the industry and emphasized that the future is biotechnology.

There is no better person than Dr Roberts to bust the commonly held (mis) conceptions on the horrors of GM food, and other such political considerations that science and scientists have to often contend with. He bagged the Nobel Prize for Physiology in 1993, for discovery of introns in eukaryotic DNA and the mechanism of gene-splicing. He showed the world that genes can indeed be split.

So, when a scientist like him says, plant breeding is a form of genetic modification and that introducing one gene about which you know a lot is comparatively much lesser risk than cross-breeding at random with little knowledge—you have to believe it.

Dr Roberts, who also leads the cutting-edge scientific work at New England BioLabs in the US also stressed on the importance of taking advantage of serendipity in the course of scientific research. Keeping an open mind and looking for solutions is what really drives science, he stated recounting how BioLabs decoded the genome of filariasis bug and discovered that it had not one but three genomes—chromosomal, mitrochondrial and of another bug called Wolbachia, which is actually critical to the survival of the filariasis bug.

This was a very important finding given that according to WHO, more than a billion people across 80 countries are at risk of Filariasis. Close to 150 million people are already infected with this disease that causes chronic suffering and disability. One-third of the people infected with the disease live in India, one third are in Africa and most of the remainder are in South Asia, the Pacific and the Americas.

"There is so much of the unknown in life mechanisms, that a lot of Nobel Prizes are yet to be won in biotechnology," quipped Dr Roberts.

Looking ahead beyond 2010 Dr Roberts elaborated that the areas that one can focus on include GM foods, bioenergy, synthetic biology, stem cells, and personalized medicine. He also advised, thinking "small" is good. As far as solutions go

there is no one-size-fits- all and innovation comes in small packages, often.

- Leaders of the Indian Biotech Industry and CSIR discussed the ways to gear up the Indian biotech industry to face the global challenges. Industry leaders mulled over “The strategies for Indian Biotech in the new economic world order.” When ‘melt-down’ is the global reality in every sector, Indian biotech industry holds lot of promise to cater to the needs of food and health for the people, according to the panelists.
- When India is upgrading itself, there is an immediate need to fine tune HR and other resources. India is still facing shortage of highly motivated scientists with global outlook. Finishing schools on the lines of IT industry are creating more awareness towards the IPR environment, which is the need of the hour.
- India has unparalleled opportunity in commercializing IPRs. Most of the hurdles in India in realizing the true potential of IPs are self imposed and avoidable. There should be a change in seeing the science from technology perspective to commerce perspective. Experience of the people who are filing IPRs is not up to the mark. Industry should build capacity to generate more IPs from business point of view than scientists’ perspective. The walls between IP management offices and scientists should go.
- Increasing medical insurance coverage, growing economy and per capita income, huge number of disease population, and increasing labs and CROs make India a potential market for in vitro diagnostics (IVDs). Indigenous manufacturing of raw materials, automation of production processes, and use of lab-on-chip technology to bring multiple markers into a single platform will help reduce the cost of IVD in India.
- India is renowned for its generics industry but if India has to gain further reputation as a biopharma powerhouse, it has to start innovating. India’s strength lies in its numerous scientists who can develop amazing array of drugs, if given a chance.

- Srikumar Suryanarayanan, direct general, ABLE: “In order to catch up with the market and shorten lab-to-market cycle, Indian CROs should not settle for lesser standards that are normally acceptable to Indian levels. They should think of meeting the stringent standards in the world, if they really want to compete in the International markets. Coming to agri biotech, the benefits are more local and immediate. So we should take forward the success that we have seen to food crops.”
- Dr Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, chairperson, Karnataka’s Vision Group on Biotechnology & CMD Biocon: “Chemical genetics market mind-set has to be changed to biological genetics mind-set, as the development path of these two are different. Emerging marketing strategy to regulated market strategy is the need of the hour, as proprietary technologies under strict regulatory regime can only enter global market.
- Dr Rajat Goyal, country director, International AIDS Vaccine Initiative: “The lack of availability of vaccines, R&D investment, regulatory responsiveness and public interest as the main reasons for the lack of novel vaccine development in India.
- Philips Mendes, Innovation Law, Australia: “Licensor and Licensee need to focus more on their respective interests instead of positions. Never dive into a negotiation, you may deny many opportunities to prepare thoroughly. Information shared and gathered plays crucial role in licensing and true value realization by both the parties.”
- Dr PM Murali, managing director of Evolva: “With drug costs escalating every year, there’s every possibility of sub-$1billion drug coming out of India in nanotechnology.”

Call for government support

The Indian biotechnology industry wants the government to recognize the benefits that have come from this sector to date and the potential of this sector to positively impact on the economy, environment, agriculture and healthcare, and insists that further investment will deliver benefits in a much higher level.

Prithviraj Chavan, the minister of state (independent charge) for science and technology, during his visit at the ninth edition of Bangalore Bio had an exclusive interaction with the biotechnology industry leaders during a closed door roundtable. The roundtable, organized by Association of Biotechnology Led Enterprises (ABLE), was convened to gather inputs from diverse segments of the biotechnology industry as to the current issues concerning it, with a view to determining forward recommendations.

The discussion had the who’s who of the Indian biotech industry—Dr Shrikumar Suryanarayan, DG, ABLE; Dr Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, CMD, Biocon; Dr Villoo Morawala Patell, CMD, Avesthagen; Dr Vijay Chandru, MD, Strand Life Sciences; Anuradha Acharya, CEO, Ocimum Biosolutions; Dr KK Narayanan, MD, Metahelix Life sciences; PM Murali, CEO, Evolva Biotech; Pramod Chaudhary, CEO, Praj Industries; Sarath Naru, MD, Venture East India Fund Advisors; Dr Samir Brahmachari, DG, CSIR; Arvind Jaanu, MD, KBITS; and Narayanan Suresh, group editor, BioSpectrum.

The primary focus of the discussion at the industry roundtable was on HR issues and mechanisms to reduce hurdles in the regulatory system. The deliberation that followed was multidimensional in the sense that the view points of all the segments—biopharma, bioagri, bioinformatics, biofuel, services, venture capital companies were sought.

Shrikumar Suryanarayan said, “There is an urgent need for world class institutions. The institutes should strengthen basic sciences like immunology, cell biology, recombinant technology, and government can play a significant role in this space.”

Dr Kiran Mazumdar Shaw said, “The government should take serious steps in attracting NRI scientists. A proper mechanism should be employed to attract them here.” The lack of skilled manpower was predicted to slow down the growth of this

industry, which was otherwise racing ahead at 30 percent growth in the past three years and at 18 percent this year.

The other issue raised at the industry roundtable was on the structure and efficiency of the Indian government policies and the regulatory system. Dr Shaw expressed that the Indian policies should be more R&D enabling and business enabling. She further said that all the people in the regulatory system are not that knowledgeable to create an innovative ecosystem." The DST should stress on local innovative solutions. Biotech being a high risk business it requires better financial facilitation and incentives—a must for innovation and entrepreneurship, she added.

Highlighting the issues facing the services sector, Anuradha Acharya said, "We face a lot of problems in running a services company. More than hundred shipments are done every day which results in plenty of paper works. The process should be made more simple and smooth. Also, the duties and taxes are very high."

While Dr Villoo Morawala-Patell agreed to the point, she brought to the table another basic problem, about the very structure of the Indian stock market listing, She suggested that the government should change the financial model to allow research focused companies which were yet to reach large scale revenues and also to list on the stock exchanges. It should let the people decide their investment choice than the financial institutions.

Narayanan Suresh, group editor, BioSpectrum, highlighted the incoherent voices emerging from within the government and regulators about the importance of genetically modified (GM) food crops. He urged the need for the scientific ministries and experts to stand up and speak their mind on the importance of biotechnology. He pointed out that the benefits of India's biotech industry were mostly enjoyed by foreigners as two-thirds of the industry revenue came from experts. He stressed the need to increase access to affordable medicare to Indian citizens and called for schemes which include biotech vaccines and drugs in the National Immunization Program. Countries like Bangladesh have included Hepatitis B and other important vaccines in the national program, while India has ignored these India-made products that are used widely in over 100 other countries. n

BioSpectrum Bureau