

What ails India's drug discovery research?

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These scientists have been toiling hard in their laboratories to discover new drugs to cure many incurable diseases that are the scourge of human civilization. These centers were run by an MNC company, AstraZeneca and Indian drug major Piramal Life Sciences.

Piramal Life Sciences' promoters were armed with nearly \$2 billion in cash from the sale of their drug formulations business to Abbott Laboratories a few years ago. They made big announcements about using part of the cash towards the complex task of discovering new drugs instead of concentrating on more generics and became media darlings overnight. A few years later, and after the failure of an experimental cancer drug during the clinical trials, Piramal Life Sciences has thrown in the towel "to protect the interests of shareholders."

The 180 scientists at the Piramal center have been given two options: take voluntary retirement or move to other divisions of the company which focus on generics drugs business. New drug discovery is a long arduous journey that needs to be sustained over 10-15 years and burn about \$1 billion to get one new product to the market. The second case of multinational AstraZeneca closing its iconic research center in the heart of Bangalore is more interesting. The center was a showpiece of AstraZeneca's social concerns and tried to develop drugs against tuberculosis, a deadly disease that affects mostly developing countries. The Bangalore center was the first of the corporate research centers set up in India as the country opened up to the world nearly three decades ago.

The AstraZeneca center was where a large number of India's biotech entrepreneurs learnt skills of the trade. It did to biotech sector what the Texas Instruments achieved for the information technology sector by setting up the first software center and make Bangalore the Silicon Valley. In a twist of irony, the AstraZeneca's high tech biotech laboratories has been bought by an Indian software company Cognizant Solutions. Probably, the laboratories will be pulled down and thousands of cubicles to house software programmers will be set up on the campus.

Another software giant, Kris Gopalakrishnan, co-founder of Infosys tried his best to salvage the AstraZeneca facility and use it to house a Brain Research center which he is supporting at the nearby Indian Institute of Science. Unfortunately, he was outbid by Cognizant in the battle between two Indian software companies.

Meanwhile, both the Modi government at the center and the Siddaramaiah government in Karnataka watched helplessly unable to either acquire the AstraZeneca facility and convert it into a biotech incubator or use the leverage of government power to prevent the destruction of a global R&D facility. AstraZeneca had gifted a similar facility two years ago in Montreal, Canada, to the local government to run it as an incubation center instead of closing down. The MNC has thumbed its nose at the state government as well as the center.

Two other pharma companies- Dr Reddy's Laboratories and Glenmark Pharmaceuticals-are the few left in the drug discovery business and have been soldiering on despite the failure of some new discoveries during clinical trials. How long will the nascent Indian drug discovery flag keep flying is a moot question.