

We need to focus on diseases unique to China: Dr Chi-huey Wong

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Academia Sinica is an autonomous research institution in Taiwan that is doing pioneering work in the field of science and technology, including biotechnology. Its present president, [Dr Chi-Huey Wong](#), leads from the front with his path-breaking work in glycoscience.

He has been interested in and actively involved in the research of glycoscience in the past 30 years, initially with focus on technology development and then on application to study diseases, especially cancer and some infectious diseases. His work has helped in better understanding how cell surface carbohydrates play a role in disease progression. It has also helped in identifying important carbohydrate molecules associated with diseases for drug discovery and diagnostic development.

In Taiwan, as the chief scientific adviser to the government, he plays an important role in shaping the biotechnology industry. Excerpts from an email interview with him:

Tell us about the work being done by Academia Sinica in the field of biotechnology.

Dr Wong: Academia Sinica is the highest ranking academic institution in Taiwan with heavy research activities in sciences and humanities. Both discovery research and translational innovation are the major efforts in the life science division. In addition, there is an incubation center for start-up companies that receive technologies invented by scientists in Academia Sinica for development into products, mainly in the area of new medicines and to some extent new medical tools and

instruments.

What are recent initiatives taken in Taiwan to push the growth of biotechnology industry?

Our government has enacted two new bylaws to encourage and facilitate the development of biotechnology in Taiwan: one is called Biotechnology and New Pharmaceuticals Act and the other is called Fundamental Science and Technology Act. These two bylaws provide incentives for investors and inventors from tax and equity point of view and allow the inventors from academia to serve as director or adviser to the company. The bylaws also encourage academia-industry collaboration.

What more is required to push Taiwan's growth in the sector?

In addition to making our regulatory policy consistent with the world standard, we encourage our biotech sector to strengthen their IP portfolio and conduct clinical trials using the FDA or the EMA guidelines. We also have signed an agreement with China to use harmonized guidelines such as ICH for conducting clinical trials and currently we are in discussion about the action plan. These will help facilitate the biotech development.

What advantages does Taiwan have over other Asian countries and what are the major challenges before companies operating there?

Taiwan has a universal healthcare system for everyone and the quality of clinical medicine in Taiwan is excellent. But the biotech development is just about to take off, due to the recent establishment of the new bylaws and infrastructure that are considered to be competitive with the more advanced countries. We need to focus on some disease areas unique to the Chinese population for market differentiation and increase the healthcare expenditure in order to improve the quality and thus stimulate the development of new drugs and high-end medical devices. We also need to encourage translational medicine research so that important discoveries can be further incubated to create commercial opportunities.