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ASIA EDITION

“Biotech startups still need support in terms of talent, and resources to bring their innovations to market”

01 May 2024 | Opinion | By Ankit Kankar

Raymond Chow has recently stepped in as the Vice President, Asia Pacific at US-headquartered Cytiva, a global provider of technologies and services for biological therapies, formerly known as GE Healthcare Life Sciences. Chow brings with him more than 30 years’ experience in the life sciences industry, working with renowned companies such as Philips Healthcare, Boston Scientific, GE Healthcare, BD. In conversation with BioSpectrum Asia, Raymond Chow, Vice President- Asia Pacific, Cytiva shares details about his vision to take the brand to the next level.

What are the key drivers for you to join Cytiva? What “new air” do you hope to bring to Cytiva?

One of the major factors in my decision to join Cytiva was the allure of the biotech/biopharma sector, where so many technologies are being developed to address the need for new therapeutics that can serve the community at large. The merger of Pall Life Sciences and Cytiva forming the “new Cytiva” also possesses the portfolio and technical expertise that can address the needs of the industry to bring these therapeutics from bench to bedside. This is what excites me.

As an experienced business veteran, I am also curious to apply the Danaher Business System (DBS) to create an environment where our people can bring their best to work, and help our customers bring life-changing therapeutics to the wider community in the shortest time possible.

After the integration of Cytiva and Pall Life Sciences, what are the key strengths and challenges for the “new” company?

Both Pall and Cytiva are distinguished brands. By coming together, our customers benefit by tapping our combined expertise. For example, in upstream bioprocessing, Cytiva’s single-use technology for fluid management complements Pall’s bioreactor system, which is well known in the market. Cytiva also benefits by bringing Pall’s incredible expertise in filtration to the fold, and this was formerly a missing puzzle in Cytiva’s portfolio.

As we celebrate our fourth anniversary, we’re excited to continue being that strong partner to our customers by focusing on innovation and digitalisation, especially in data management.

In terms of challenges, I can see that the industry is still adjusting to a post-COVID reset. Amid that, our industry continues to face the perennial challenge of securing talent and funding, especially for startups.

While biotech advances continue to create surges in demand for highly-qualified staff, startups are struggling to compete for mature talent, and to train the fresh hands, compared to well-established institutions and big biopharma companies. Data from the 2023 Global Biopharma Resilience Index shows that nearly 25 per cent of pharma executives globally report that it’s a substantial challenge to find and retain manufacturing talent. Biopharma leaders say that manufacturing talent for GMP-certified or equivalent facilities, R&D talent, and digital/technology talent are the hardest to attract, find and retain.

In addition, during the pandemic, when mRNA vaccines saved lives around the world, the biotechnology industry and its investors have been searching eagerly for ‘the next BioNTech.’ However, the inflow of capital to startups has declined since 2022. Despite the successful collaborations that brought the world COVID-19 vaccines, Cytiva’s Biopharma Resilience Index shows that the global R&D ecosystem has weakened since 2021. Biotech startups still need support in terms of talent, and resources to scale up production and bring their innovations to market.

What’s the role of the Asia-Pacific to Cytiva? Does Cytiva have new investment plans in the region?

Asia Pacific is a region where Cytiva can make a positive impact. For example, we have an opportunity to address the need for training and education and in turn, improve the industry’s resilience in the talent pillar across Asia Pacific.

This is done in part through our Fast Trak Education and Training Program, which is available at six centers globally – three of which are in APAC (Korea, China, and India). For example, the India center collaborates with Bangalore BioInnovation Centre (BBC) to set up a world class incubation center and provide bioprocessing training programs to support the startup ecosystem. In September 2023, we expanded our Fast Trak center in Shanghai. Now, the 11000 square metre facility can train 2000 people every year, up from 300 per year, covering the whole biopharma process from process development to commercialisation.

To bridge the talent gap between industry and academia in Southeast Asia, we offer trainings at?the Cytiva Experience Learning Lab (CELL), and our?center?of excellence in Nanyang?Polytechnic.? Altogether, we’ve conducted more than 100 trainings with academic and research institutes?on the latest bioprocessing and production techniques.? We’ll?continue to do our part to nurture talent in Southeast Asia.

In addition to the Fast Trak center in Shanghai, we recently invested in our capabilities within APAC by establishing a manufacturing facility and customer experience center in Pune, India. The facility is set to double Cytiva's manufacturing capacity in India for tangential flow, virus filtration, and inactivation systems. Our Cytiva Experience Center also provides the ongoing learning and development needed to accelerate the development of novel therapeutics and help India deliver on its mission to become a global biomanufacturing hub.

We'll continue to nurture innovation and the R&D ecosystem by rolling out our BioChallenge competition across Asia Pacific. Since 2018, Cytiva's BioChallenge competition has helped address challenges that many biotechs face?– access to funding and talent, scaling up and getting to market faster. Cytiva in China, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand have hosted their own iterations of it.

With BioChallenge, biotech startups can present their methodologies and how they plan to address patients' needs. In turn, Cytiva supports the best ideas by assisting with scale up, process development and optimisation, as well as training programs to attract and develop talent.

After COVID-19, the biopharma industry has entered a new era. What's Cytiva's game changer to embrace the latest trends in the industry?

As a technology-oriented company, innovation to support new modalities, such as cell and gene therapies and mRNA, will enhance the efficiency and accelerate the speed to support patients.

mRNA is a high-potential technology to address virus-related cancers, which account for 20 per cent of cancers as well as inf ectious diseases such as dengue and malaria. However, mRNA molecules need to be more stable. They have logistics and storage challenges. They can require down to –20?C or even –70?C storage conditions. mRNA also rapidly degrades inside the body, which is an advantage for vaccines, but creates some challenges for many therapeutics that require long-term exposure for effect. Cytiva supports drug developers working on mRNA vaccines and therapeutics from discovery to delivery with our FlexFactory and KUBio solutions, as well as our robotic aseptic filling solutions.

Cell therapies have proven to be effective for patients with blood cancers and are set to bring major improvements to many other cancer treatments over the next decade. However, the development of cell and gene therapy products is still fraught with complex supply chains, and high risks of failure.? They also need to be produced close to the patient, making them highly complex to manufacture. Risk reduction and time to market are critical parameters for success to roll out cell and gene therapies.

As Cytiva was involved in the first successful paediatric trial of CAR-T therapy in 2012, we foresaw challenges and the need for simplification and automation. Manufacturing technologies have since matured to allow for the reproducible manufacturing of cell therapies and I'm proud to share that our current range of flexible solutions and expertise positions us well to support customers as they roll out this next generation of medicines.

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