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Industry-academia meet focuses on innovation in India

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New Delhi: India's department of biotechnology (DBT) and biotechnology industry research assistance council (BIRAC) have for the first time ever held a meeting called 'Innovation for Affordable Product Development' from October 15-16, 2012, at Manesar, Haryana. The event saw bigwigs of biotech industry and academia mingling with each other on a government sponsored platform. The event's focus was on innovators, who interacted, networked and discussed successful case studies, challenges and opportunities for strengthening the biotech enterprise.

In his opening remarks, Dr G Padmanabhan, NASI-Chairman and former director, Indian Institute of Science, talked about the relevance of sharing information. He exhorted the persons in the sector to come out of their shells and be more proactive. "In earlier times, industry used to be after academia but now we see that it is vice versa. SBIRI and BIPP have been instrumental in bringing about that change," said Dr Padmanabhan. Speaking further on the current status of projects in diverse verticals of the biotech sector, he said that, "In biopharma, there are various products that are still in pipeline and the development is still not complete. We hope to see more and more of them seeing the light of the day soon. Also I feel the focus should be more on vaccines. In agri-biotechnolgy, while we have only Bt cotton as a successful product, others that could have made impact have been lost in between efforts."

Sounding highly enthusiastic, Dr M K Bhan, secretary, DBT, in his address to the gathering, said that, "Lets keep working towards the future and see ourselves as architects of the same step-by-step. In the next 30 years, we must be known as global leaders. For that we require to work towards building a strong system of innovation. Empowerment of young innovators in various areas is one of the strategic keys to achieve that. Also we must understand the supply and demand or push and pull thoroughly."

Dr Bhan also asked public institutes to be more forthcoming. "Public sector science must produce knowledge that can empower the industry. However, the question to be asked is whether we as academia are doing enough for pushing the innovation?," he asked.

Dr Renu Swarup, managing director, BIRAC, while welcoming the delegates said, "I hope this forum helps you all in identifying the opportunities to collaborate and work together for laying down a road map for the future." BIRAC, a recently established public sector organization of the DBT, ministry of science and technology, aims at empowering and enabling the biotech innovation ecosystem for affordable product development. One of the key strategies of BIRAC is fostering innovating capabilities in all places of research and with a focus on startups and small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

On this occasion, the DBT innovator awards were also distributed among various companies for their innovative projects in the different areas. The meeting saw close to 150 persons from industry and academia coming together to share ideas and new information. The exhibitions and the round table sessions in the areas of agriculture, diagnostics, drugs and vaccines, and green technology were the unique highlight of the meet.

The first plenary session was on transformation from science to business for biotech companies. The session captured the experiences of entrepreneurs and start-ups. The moderators included Dr Utkarsh Palnitkar, MD, Pluripotent Capital; Dr Anand Anandkumar, chairman and MD, Cellworks Research India; The panelists for this session included Professor K Ramachandran, Indian School of Business; Dr Sanjay Singh, CEO, Gennova Biopbarrnaceuticals; Dr Deepanwita Chattopadhyay, MD and CEO, IKP Knowledge Park; Dr Vinay Konaje, founder and director, Navya Biologicals; Mr Pankaj Sharma, CEO, LeadInvent Technologies; Mr Sidhant Jena, CEO, Janacare Solutions.

On the second day, four parallel sessions were organized in the areas of vaccines, diagnostics, biomedical implants and devices, agriculture and industrial processes. The focus was on the key challenges and opportunities for taking each sector forward.

Panel I, which held discussions on drugs and vaccines, included moderators like Dr V S Chauhan, director, ICGEB; Dr Rajat Goyal, country director, IAVI. The panelists included eminent individuals like Dr T S Rao, adviser, DBT; Mr Rayasam Prasad, COO, Biological E; Dr Umesh Shaligram, director, R&D, Serum Institute of India; Dr Goutam Ghosh, VP, technology management group, Panacea Biotec; Dr Ashwini Nangia, director, technical, Crystalin Research; Dr K Mosuvan, MD, Tergene Biotech; and Dr Radha Rangarajan, CEO, Vitas Pharma Research.

The panel II, which was on biomedical devices and diagnostics, included moderators like Dr Navin Khanna, group leader, ICGEB, and Dr B V Ravi Kumar, MD, XCyton Diagnostics. The panelists included individuals like Dr Balram Bhargava, ED, SIB Center, AIIMS; Dr Alok Ray, professor, IIT, New Delhi; Dr Alka Sharma, scientist F, DBT; Mr Yashdeep Kumar, MD, Stryker India; Dr Gnasekaran V, GM, Perfint Healthcare; Mr Dinesh Kumar, director, DESIGNINNOVA ; Dr Rohit Srivastava, assoc. professor, IIT Mumbai and Mr Avijit Bansal, SIB Fellow, SIB Center.

Panel III that was on agriculture and was moderator by Dr Deepak Pental, director, CGMCP, University of Delhi; Dr Vijay Raghavan, Sathguru; and Dr K K Narayanan, MD, Metahelix Life. Among the panelists were Dr Akhilesh Tyagi, director, NIPGR; Dr P Balasubramanian, professor, TNAU; Dr Ajay Parida, ED, MSSRF; Dr J P Khurana, professor, University of Delhi; Dr K S Narayanaswamy, chairman and CEO, Geo Biotechnologies; Dr Paresh Verma, Bioseed; Dr Arvind Kapur, CEO (vegetables divison), Rasi Seeds; Dr J S Rajput, director, research, Nirmal Seeds.

The panel IV titled 'industrial products and green technology' was moderated by Dr S Ramaswamy, CEO, C-CAMP. The panelists included Dr A K Panda, scientist, National Institute of Immunology; Dr Arvind Lali, professor and head, DBT-ICT Center for Energy Biosciences; Mr Ashish Mantri, MD, Abhay Cotex; Dr Banibrata Pandey, VP, Nagarjuna Fertilizers and Chemicals; Mr Nelson Vadassery, manager, technology and engineering, Sea6 Energy; Dr Sunil Khanna, professor, NIIT University; and Mr Sunil Chari, director., Rossari Biotech.

This convergence of innovators proved to be useful for discussing and presenting some important issues, including successful case studies, wherein technologies have been translated to product development, promoting and further augmenting industry-academia interaction, promoting high risk and high level innovation, opportunities and issues in mobilizing resources, and critical factors that need to be addressed, especially in the case of spin-offs, start-ups and SME's involved in product innovation. One of the important factors discussed was the development of a performance measurement matrix and impact assessment of specific projects and the scheme as a whole.