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Life Sciences firms collaborate with BMGF to fight COVID-19

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Companies are working to identify concrete actions that will accelerate treatments, vaccines, and diagnostics to the field



A consortium of life sciences companies announced an important collaboration to accelerate the development, manufacture, and delivery of vaccines, diagnostics, and treatments for COVID-19.

The life sciences industry brings a range of assets, resources, and expertise needed to identify effective and scalable solutions to the pandemic, which is affecting billions worldwide. The impact on health systems, economies, and livelihoods is profound, and an effective response requires an unprecedented collaboration across governments, academia, the private sector, and the philanthropic community.

As co-chair of a consortium life science companies headquartered across three continents, Vas Narasimhan, chief executive officer of Novartis, said, “We feel a deep shared responsibility to see if there are specific areas where collaboration across the life sciences industry and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) can accelerate solutions to this pandemic. In addition to the individual contributions companies are already making, collective action is critical to ensure any promising studies into vaccines, drugs, and diagnostics are quickly scaled to people around the world who are affected by this pandemic.”

Trials of existing drugs, diagnostic tests, compounds, and investigational vaccines have begun across the globe to identify interventions that could slow or end the pandemic. Products that demonstrate efficacy will require clinical study, scale up of manufacturing, and distribution if proven effective. The life sciences industry has extensive experience in managing these processes for products that reach billions of people every day.

Mark Suzman, chief executive officer of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation said, “We know that the private sector is where the technical skills and know-how regarding discovery, clinical trials, and commercialization sit. We look to harness that knowledge and experience—combining it where possible—to connect with national regulators and the World Health Organization to see if we can help flatten the curve of this epidemic and make sure the results reach everyone around the world, particularly those at highest risk and the poorest.”

Following a conference call with Gates Foundation leadership earlier this month, companies are working to identify concrete actions that will accelerate treatments, vaccines, and diagnostics to the field. As a first step, 15 companies have agreed to share their proprietary libraries of molecular compounds that already have some degree of safety and activity data with the COVID-19 Therapeutics Accelerator—launched by the Gates Foundation, Wellcome, and Mastercard two weeks ago—to quickly screen them for potential use against COVID-19. Successful hits would move rapidly into in vivo trials in as little as two months.

“This is an encouraging start in a critical area, because if any of these compounds are shown to be effective against COVID-19, it dramatically accelerates the path to product approval and scale up. While each of the consortium’s partners will also be pursuing independent efforts with national governments and others, we are optimistic that this unprecedented collaboration will provide a platform for a fundamentally different kind of partnership to help address this global health emergency", said Suzman.

Companies participating in the collaboration include BD, bioMérieux, Boehringer Ingelheim, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Eisai, Eli Lilly, Gilead, GSK, Johnson & Johnson, Merck (known as MSD outside the U.S. and Canada), Merck KGaA, Novartis, Pfizer, and Sanofi.