

"Our primary aim lies in enhancing our scope in drug discovery"

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Ram Sharma, managing director, BD India

Becton Dickinson (BD) in collaboration with NCBS is setting up a center of excellence for flow cytometry. The collaboration is designed to develop and organize workshops, seminars and training programs on flow cytometric applications for basic and clinical researchers. Ram Sharma, MD, BD India, shares more light on this initiative.

Why are you setting up the center?

We believe flow cytometry is a relatively niche application and it needs to become mainstream. The question was how to make flow cytometry a mainstream application so that the scientists and life science research institutions harness the power of this application. We considered working with a premier research institution like NCBS to showcase the technology and provide hands-on training.

We wanted to establish a center that would provide the researchers an opportunity to play with this technology and solve their problems, thereby, improving their solutions. A lot of researchers need some training on using the machines and NCBS, which has been in this stream for a long time, has experts who can train the researchers to use the machine the right way to find the right answers. With this center, they can make use of the technology to its full extent.

Flow cytometry is all about cell analysis. Scientists want to know what exactly is happening inside a cell, hence research begins there. Unless you take a good look at the cell, you won't know the progression of a disease or how a drug is interacting in a cell.

What prompted BD to set up this center?

The first reason is that we own this technology. It is a 20-year old technology, which was co-developed by Stanford University and us. We feel that this technology has the capability to deliver real good solutions. Some 15 years ago, we never imagined that flow cytometry will become core for monitoring CD4. This is now the most preferred solution for monitoring HIV/AIDS patients. Almost 90 percent of all CD4 monitoring is done using our flow cytometry.

Moreover, though the technology already has a lot of clinical applications like for cancer, HIV, cord blood banking, and stem cells, it has not been intensely deployed in the areas of drug discovery, life science research and basic research. With this partnership with NCBS, we can increase the scope of our products in the life science research applications. Our primary aim lies in enhancing our scope in drug discovery.

This is a very focused center on flow cytometry. The major difference between India and other countries is that they are very much specialized and they look at some verticals and excel in those verticals, while in India we want to do something general in biotechnology. This center is therefore a very focused one, meant only for flow cytometry.

Can you elaborate on the investments?

All our investments are long-term. This is a joint collaboration between NCBS and BD and both of us are investing in the center. While we take care of training and education, they take care of some expertise. However, we have offered our technology at a significantly subsidized cost, thereby considerably reducing their costs.

Has the research community in India latched on to this technology?

Our business is doing very well. We started our business around 1984 through a distributor and had about a dozen placements till 1996, when BD started its own operation in India. We have placed some 350 flow cytometry systems in both clinical and research so far.

Who are your competitors in this space?

There are several global companies like Beckman Coulter, Guava Technologies and Dako offering such products in India, but BD is the clear leader. Over a period of time, the technology becomes less competitive. The real difference is the quality of people who are training and educating the customers and the support that you provide to your customers. We also have to keep a constant check on the efficiency of the systems and probability of new applications for investment.

Jahanara Parveen