

Walk the Talk on Policy

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On the occasion of BioSpectrum Awards Nite on December 21, 2007, BioSpectrum organized a panel discussion to gauge the mood of the industry and understand the implications of the National Biotechnology Development Strategy.

Prof. Samir K Brahmachari, the new chief of Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR); Dr Cyrus Poonawalla, chairman, Serum Institute, Pune; Dr Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, CMD, Biocon; Dr KK Narayanan, managing director, Metahelix Life Sciences Private Ltd and president, Association of Biotech-Led Enterprises (ABLE); and Dr S Natesh, senior advisor, Department of Biotechnology, Government of India participated in the discussion moderated by N Suresh, Group Editor of BioSpectrum (India and Asia). Biotechnology has been seen as an extension of the knowledge sector after the success of IT and telecom. "That's how biotech came into prominence as an emerging industry. The government opened the IT sector with a policy in 1986, which actually led to the emergence of the software services industry. Further the National IT Task Force recommendations in 1999 paved the way for the opening up of the telecom sector and the creation of the BPO industry. Similarly, the National Telecom Policy 1994 has created the booming mobile telephone industry, which has become the world's second largest in size in just a decade. The biotech sector today is at a similar juncture. So we would like to know what are the similar things that can happen to the biotech industry with the new policy?" said N Suresh, inviting the panelists to share their observations, concerns, and key challenges. Suresh also asked the panelists whether they foresee the emergence of a totally new industry segment within biotech, which is not there now but in 5-10 years due to the impact of the Biotech Policy. Excerpts from the panel discussion on the Biotech Policy.

Dr. Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw: I was very much involved in the process of developing this strategy documentation. One of the very important aspects of this policy framework is the participation of all the key stakeholders in creation of this document. Because of this, several features concerning the development of India's biotech industry have been very effectively portrayed in this document. The focus has been on addressing the regulatory issues. The goal was how to create a national biotech regulatory authority that will actually help regulate the sector and evolve a regulatory framework that would be very conducive for developing biotech products and bringing them into the market place, complying with the safety, efficacy and other norms of the regulators and with a strong focus on timelines. The aim is to see quick introduction of biotech products and at affordable prices.

The second aspect was about giving fillip to innovation and nurturing innovation across the board. The third aspect was related to encouraging entrepreneurship and growing the biotech business. The focus is on how we bring in the investments into the sector and on developing spin-offs. Another important feature is about global partnering and about really making sure that we make the whole environment very conducive to global clinical services and research. You know that we are trying to make India the preferred hub for clinical development and for R&D. So the emphasis is on creating the right infrastructure and academic excellence. It also talks about creating a strong bond between the industry and the academia. We require researchers, investigators, and scientists and this whole exercise is about employment, talent creation and talent management. I believe it is very well thought out document.

Dr. Cyrus S Poonawalla: A single window clearance mechanism is proposed to be put in place. We have been hearing about this for years, but this is yet to become a reality. This is the most important aspect, which should be first emphasized. It takes months, may be some times years, to get a product through to the market. It is very disheartening when things are getting delayed. It's even more disappointing for the small entrepreneurs as their capital is blocked and they cannot even move on to the next project. I think the regulator has to keep this reality in mind and see to that the clearance mechanism is made very effective.

I believe there is also a fund that has been created for biotechnology. This should be rationalized and distributed to smaller entrepreneurs promptly, as they need the funds to stand up. They should not get stuck in procedural issues. The funding should be timely. So I think these are the two things of the policy, which are very welcome, but their implementation will really be the keynote for the policy to succeed.

Prof. Samir K Brahmachari: One single element of the whole policy I insist on is 50 colleges. I have been talking to Dr Bhan identifying colleges and empowering them and I am glad to see that it has come true. I grew up in Bangalore in an academic environment and I realize that our weakness is in our ability to take the government funds and optimally utilize it. The funds can be 100 percent utilized in collaboration with the private sector. I was one among the first few people to have created a private-public partnership model and have seen the outcome of such a model. The private-public partnership has been very well documented. The government can put in a lot of money but the energy of the private sector and the small amount of flexibility the private sector brings in is very important. We don't have enough capacity to absorb the money that the government has given.

Further, people should be empowered to innovate. The challenge is how do we empower and listen to young people when they are saying something absurd and out of the box. If we cannot hear them and implement their suggestions, then, however good a policy it may be, it would remain frozen. So if we have to target any innovative space, we have to be ready to take the risk and face recognized failures. The policy framework should allow people to fail and acknowledge failure. The policy has all the elements, but the challenge will be in implementing it.

Dr. KK Narayanan: It has been five years of consultation before this policy got approved. A lot of people have worked together and Dr Bhan and his colleagues have put together a good policy and we are not disappointed. Dr Brahmachari has unambiguously underlined the importance of private sectors as partners in nation building. The policy not only talks about public-private partnership but also makes a very clean statement that 30 percent of the total research grants from the DBT will go to public-private partnership projects. Further the policy underlines the importance of development of human resources. There are a number of initiatives that have been listed which actually focus on improving the quantity and quality of the human resource. There are several other wonderful things in this policy. The telecom or the IT policy succeeded in growing the sector because people put their money where their mouth was and that's coming back to what Dr Poonawalla just now said--we need to walk the talk, we need to put the money where the mouth is and that's going to be the key. Another important and encouraging factor in this policy statement which needs to be commended is the paragraph that talks about key performance indicator. It means that the people who drafted this policy and who have passed it have taken upon themselves the responsibility to make the policy succeed. We need to see so many more companies coming into this country and being profitable and prosperous. These are all key performance indicators. We are used to these terms only in the private sector. It is so refreshing to see it in a government policy and I don't know any other policy or document, which takes on this responsibility. If that does not happen, we at least we know what we should be doing differently to make it a success. So these are some of the very positive things about this policy. Now the important thing is to walk the talk.

Dr S Natesh: The major issue was bringing in the synergy to the sector by combining the variegated potential of different groups together. Towards this end, we have tried to take a whole lot of measures that went into making this policy.

What we have done through this policy is that we have made our intent very clear. Therefore we look forward to creative ideas from the industry as to how should we spend that money. We would want the industry to come up with suggestions.

One of the things that we would do is work closely with the industry and establish some more finishing schools for post graduate students and get them exposed to the industry. We are trying to attract world class scientists from abroad. We are also looking at mobility of scientists between academia and industry where we would support the salary of the scientists when they work for the industry and also may pay for the services of the substitute he or she is having when he goes to the industry and works there. These are the measures that should go a long way.

We have also thought of joint chairs between industry and DBT where 50 percent of the money will be spent for industry work.

Then we propose a new program--a shared cost partnership with the industry. The purity of this would be that irrespective of science, industry can partner with them and the money thus given by the public sector would be utilized for two purposes. One is that industry is not investing too much on advanced technologies so we would help the industries in investing in the technologies. The second thing would be to meet the unmet needs of the country for national emergencies such as diseases, droughts and natural calamities where there is a social impact.

We strongly recommend that industry set up R&D foundations so that DBT can invest in those foundations. And treat these foundations like any public sector partner. These R&D foundations should become a source to train skilled workforce for the industry as well provide future leadership.

To promote and manage all these, we proposed setting up a Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Transcript which will work as a watch dog. These are all suggestions to promote further discussions.

We are serious about all these and we hope that the industry will also look at it very seriously. Do not see this as a banking assistance program. We keep the window open for the next three months and it would be best if BioSpectrum could manage to convey the suggestions from the industry to us.