

TCS bags drug discovery deal

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Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), a leading global technology services company, announced that it has entered into an agreement with Congenia, a biotechnology start-up promoted by Italy's Genextra Spa group to provide advanced fragment-based lead optimization solutions for drug discovery.

The agreement is the first of its kind for an IT company. The Life Sciences R&D Division of TCS will work on "P66", a target protein identified by Congenia as a key protein involved in several age-related diseases and will develop optimized drug leads based on this.

Dr M Vidyasagar, executive vice-president and head of TCS' Advanced Technology Centre, Hyderabad, which houses the Life Sciences R&D Division along with other activities, said, "This is a historic occasion for TCS and the first contract where the deliverable is not software code, but a set of molecules. We are proud to partner with the Genextra group, a bio-tech pioneer in Italy." TCS is committed to putting in place a complete suite of offerings in the life sciences segment, spanning genomics and proteomics, database integration, drug discovery, and preventive healthcare, Dr Vidyasagar added.

TCS will be using modules of its own product "Bio-Suite" to work on the target protein. It will screen a "virtual fragment library" of tens of thousands of potential lead molecules to predict which of these might bind themselves to the target protein and thereby inhibit its function. TCS will also produce a first-cut analysis of the ADMET (Absorption, Distribution, Metabolism, Excretion, and Toxicity) profile of the lead molecules.

The optimized lead molecules produced by TCS will be further developed by Congenia through animal trials and eventually human clinical trials. The work will be executed in the Advanced Technology Centre of TCS. Wet chemistry and crystallography work will be carried out by TCS' sub-contractor, Altiora Ventures in Israel. The biological assays will be carried out by Congenia in Milan, Italy. The contract has a duration of 18 months, and incorporates payments based on the number of optimized lead molecules delivered. Paolo Fundaro, CEO of Congenia said, "TCS' competencies in bio-chemistry and computation techniques offer a unique value proposition. Using these techniques, we expect to obtain good lead candidates for a drug for pre-clinical trials and save time in R&D."

Bharat Biotech to set up factory in Malaysia

Hyderabad-based Bharat Biotech International Ltd will be setting up its first overseas plant in Perak, Malaysia. The new plant will be built at the pharmaceutical park in Seri Iskandar and will produce vaccines for typhoid and Hepatitis B, besides other recombinant products.

Dr Krishna M Ella, chairman and managing director, Bharat Biotech said the company would be investing about RM50 million in the new plant's manufacturing, and research and development divisions. Bharat Biotech signed a memorandum of agreement with Remco Engineering and Consultancy Sdn Bhd and Perak Development Corporation (PDC) towards this. Under the joint venture, Bharat Biotech will be responsible for providing the technical expertise, while Remco Engineering will build the plant. PDC is the land owner. Dr Krishna informed that the vaccines manufactured at the Perak plant would be used to penetrate the Middle East and Asian markets, particularly Indonesia. The new plant will be ready by the middle of 2006.

ICRISAT DG meets World Bank President

The Director General of the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT), Dr William Dar, met the President of the World Bank, Paul Wolfowitz, in Hyderabad. Dr Dar, who is also the Chair of the Alliance Executive of the Future Harvest Centers of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), thanked Wolfowitz for the World Bank support to the CGIAR and ICRISAT. The Bank is investing \$50 million per year to the CGIAR system and such investment is very focused on the rural poor in most developing countries of the world.

The CGIAR is a strategic alliance of countries, international and regional organizations, and private foundations supporting the 15 international agricultural Centers. ICRISAT is one of the 15 centers that are part of the CGIAR.

Biocon, Nobex sign research agreement

Biocon Ltd and North Carolina's Nobex Corporation have announced a global research collaboration to jointly develop an oral peptide product for the treatment of cardiovascular disease. Biocon and Nobex plan to advance the oral human brain-type natriuretic peptide (hBNP) program towards an IND (Investigational New Drug) filing with the FDA (US Food and Drug Administration) in 2007 and clinical trials beginning later that year.

The FDA approved administration of hBNP by continuous infusion in August 2001 for the treatment of acute congestive heart failure (CHF) in the hospital care setting. The intent of an oral hBNP would be to have a product available for chronic use, rather than only for acute use for a number of potential indications, including early-stage heart failure patients. This will herald a new paradigm for potentially multiple indications in cardiovascular therapy.

"Biocon is tremendously excited at the opportunity to partner with Nobex on such an important product opportunity. By co-developing a therapeutic product such as oral hBNP of substantial clinical and market value in treating heart failure and other potential cardiovascular indications, we are taking another step towards our innovative product development strategy," said Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, chairman and managing director, Biocon Ltd.

Eli Lilly launches insulin analogs in India

Eli Lilly & Company unveiled 'Humalog Mix', the insulin analog mixtures in India. Humalog Mix, called as designer insulin by the specialists, offers people with diabetes convenience, control and flexibility. It absorbs quickly and starts working within minutes to lower blood sugar. In fact, Humalog is the first mealtime insulin prescribed by doctors who specialize in treating diabetes, and would be available at Rs 389 per cartridge.

Speaking at the launch of Humalog Mix in Mumbai, Rajiv Gulati, chairman and managing director, Eli Lilly India, said, "The challenge in diabetic care is to add quality to the patient's lives, giving them freedom of dose administration and minimize hassles in the therapy. With Humalog we aim to meet and overcome these challenges".

Humalog Mix is available in three different variations: Humalog insulin lispro (rDNA origin), Humalog Mix 25 and Humalog Mix 50. These analog insulins are used as part of total glucose management that enables better long-term health. Humalog Mixtures provides both fasting and postprandial control and thus can help in preventing short term and long-term complications.

Humalog Mix25 and Humalog Mix50 meet a number of patient and physician needs. They provide the convenience and mixing accuracy of pre-mixed insulins with the benefits of the unique rapid action of Humalog. Both are more physiological than human insulin mixtures and also improve postprandial blood glucose control and reduce glycemic excursions.

Rajiv Gulati further said, "Future would see more and more innovation in the area drug administration, formulations all aimed at improving patients' lives and we at Lilly would endeavor to be the first ones to bring these to Indian public."

Bhan urges students to strive for innovation

Lauding the achievements of students at the annual convocation of the Institute of Bio-informatics and Applied Biotechnology (IBAB), Dr MK Bhan, secretary, DBT, government of India told them to inculcate the spirit of innovation.

"It is not investment which is the problem. It is the lack of innovation and discovery that is the issue. We lack the will to persist when difficulties arise," he said.

He told students to make the most of the current atmosphere in India where there is mobility, flexibility and possibility. "India had forgotten to reinvent and reengineer. But Bangalore has demonstrated the power of reinvention," he said. He called for institutions like the IBAB to try and balance the path between cooperation and competitiveness.

The third annual convocation awarded certificates to post graduate students in bioinformatics and biotechniques. Prof N Yathindra, director, IBAB said that the institute was trying to formalize the degree recognition process. Scholarships and medals sponsored by biotech companies like Millipore, Sartorius and the chief minister, were awarded to meritorious students. He also hoped that the institute would move into the proposed biotech park campus - Bangalore Helix in Electronic City next year. He also requested the biotech industry to continue augmenting IBAB by providing infrastructure and support.

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