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07 February 2008 | News



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Dr Alpna Seth, managing director, Biogen Idec

India is fast emerging as a hot destination for biotech and the proof of the pudding lies in the fact that international companies are opening up their offices here to tap the market. The last year saw US-based biotech company, Biogen Idec, headquartered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA, establish its wholly-owned Indian subsidiary in Gurgaon, Haryana.

The company which specializes in drugs for neurological disorders, autoimmune disorders and cancer, officially inaugurated its Gurgaon office in October 2007. Biogen Idec already has tie-ups with Roche and Nicholas Piramal for marketing its drugs MabThera and Avonex respectively. The company intends to continue with these partnerships and strengthen them further through its on-ground presence. The Indian entity is headed by Dr Alpna Seth, a long-time veteran of the industry, who has been with Biogen in the US for the past nine years in various leadership roles spanning R&D to commercial.

Biogen Idec has already made multi-million dollar investments in India and will continue to make significant investments in the country in the coming years as well along with expanding its operations over the next five years as the company identifies new opportunities, says Dr Seth. BioSpectrum finds out more in a chat with her.

What prompted you to open an office in India? What are the advantages that a market like India offers to a US-based company like Biogen Idec? More so, in the context of several big biotech firms setting up shop in India.

There are a number of reasons for us to open an office here. One of the prominent ones being that India is one of the most populous and fastest growing world economies with GDP growing at 8-9 percent per annum. With a shift in disease patterns from communicable to non-communicable diseases coupled with the company's strength in discovering, developing and marketing therapeutics for serious non-communicable diseases such as cancer, it is imperative that Biogen better understands and eventually caters to the needs of Indian patients through its presence in India

Adding to this, India also provides a large pool of English speaking talent especially in terms of qualified scientists and professionals and we believe that inclusion of Indian sites and investigators in Biogen Idec's global clinical development plans will provide earlier access of our novel drugs in development to Indian patients and allows the company to better understand their needs.

What would be the focus of the company in India? Will it be on the same lines as its US counterpart or are you looking at tailoring it to the needs of the Indian market?

As a pioneering biotechnology company Biogen Idec is keen to participate in and contribute to building India as a global biotech player and towards this end we are attempting to gain a pragmatic understanding of Indian market needs and dynamics by integrating India into our global clinical development plans, particularly for disease areas of high unmet needs and patient numbers.

We are also looking at broadening access of innovative drugs in development to Indian patients and investigators while facilitating the speed of development. The focus shall also be on strengthening of the existing relationships with partners, regulators and service providers and establishing new ones besides exploring R&D partnerships and collaborations with companies, investigators and academic institutions.

Overall through an on-ground presence, Biogen Idec hopes to better understand and eventually cater to the needs of the Indian market and Indian patients, which may be very different from the needs of patients in the US or elsewhere in the world.

Besides drugs in the areas of oncology, neurology, immunology and cardiology, what are the other areas you're looking at?

These four areas remain the key areas of focus for Biogen Idec and within these, we are developing drugs for several serious diseases such as Non Hodgkin's lymphoma, chronic lymphocytic leukemia, solid tumors, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, Crohn's Disease, heart failure, pulmonary arterial hypertension, Hemophilia B, rheumatoid arthritis and neuropathic pain.

Most of the drugs by the company are biotech drugs. Are you also looking at New Chemical Entities (NCEs)?

Yes, in addition to a large biologic portfolio of drug candidates, Biogen Idec is also developing several New Chemical Entities.

In order to further strengthen your base in India, what are some of the partnerships and collaborations that you are looking forward to?

Biogen Idec is interested in exploring partnerships in R&D with Indian drug companies, academic institutions as well as service providers, across the value chain ranging from discovery to development. Several Indian companies have developed strong capabilities, particularly when it comes to chemistry-based drugs, which would be of special interest to us since our core competencies are more in the arena of biologics. On the clinical development front, Biogen Idec is already working with several CROs and service providers in India.

What is your vision for the company in the next two years?

We will continue to help patients with our current products and through ongoing clinical trials and new products in development and also gain a more pragmatic and deeper understanding of unmet needs of Indian patients and India market dynamics. We also hope to contribute to the growth and development of India as a global biotechnology player.

Shalini Gupta