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The New Delhi based, International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB), well known for its work in basic research and product development, is all set to be taken over by the Indian government. The institute that has been the part of headquarters at Trieste, was earlier funded by Italy.Â

Q: What all changes are happening at the ICGEB? How has the moving out of the Italian government impacted the institute?

As you are aware that back in 2012, the Italian government which provided most of the funding to the Indian component, decided to pull out possibly due to the on-going financial situation in the country. It had conveyed to ICGEB that from 2014 onwards, all the three components (Delhi, Trieste and Cape Town) could be funded by the host governments exclusively.
That surely made the things bit complex for us. However, the ICGEB has time again shown its capability to adapt to circumstances. As you know that department of biotechnology (DBT) under government of India will take over the control of ICGEB but I am sure the flexibility definitely shall be retained. At the moment, transition formalities are being worked out. It is going in the absolutely right direction and I think there will be no impact on the functioning. We are infact encouraged by the support from the DBT. The present secretary himself is trying his best to ensure the flexibility and international status.

Q: Has there been any increase in the funding for the institute in recent years?

We had not any increase in the last few years as we were considered as an international institute. Italian government pulled out but India component has still managed well. However, with a proper funding inflow, we could have expanded and hired quality people leading to more technologies and patents. While India's contribution in ICGEB currently has been around Rs 10 crore, it might increase significantly when DBT takes over. Infact it was the DBT support that helped us to start the biofuel programme. Although a researcher will never talk about only funding as being the only criteria for his efforts, this is the time to put ICGEB to the next level.

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Q: There are talks that you will soon exit the institute. How do you look at your tenure?

Since I took over 15 years back, I can say that we had all the support from all scientists. Industry was responsive and very much active whether agri-biotech or health sector. I am satisfied that we have come a long way. I may not be able to run things here but my efforts to spearhead malarial efforts will continue with more vigour.

Q: What has been the update on your vaccine related efforts for Dengue and Malaria?

The institute has been successful in raising hopes for malaria vaccine and also the dengue diagnostic kit among other research accomplishments in the last 15 years. We developed a diagnostic kit for dengue that currently holds 90 percent of the market share. We have come a long way on the dengue vaccine and it has progressed well to an advanced stage. There are several sub-units that have been verified but the batch wise GMP grade production has become expensive. While the DBT is supporting us, we are in talks with the international partners as well.

Q: Has the ICGEB of late been more focused on the translational research? What is your message for young researchers?

While we have given an impression of being a product development institute, we are essentially a basic research institute. What we basically do is to focus on infectious diseases and plant biotechnology. My own opinion is that when you concentrate on the basic research, it automatically provides leads to the product development. Infact, we were not in the translational research from the very beginning. Now it has been 7-8 years that we initiated TB research. We don't require changing our focus but we do have the ability to do so if the need arises.
As a researcher, one must have strong basic research capabilities. Individual scientists have to be dedicated in their efforts. They have to show that they have passion.Â

Q: The antibiotic resistance is a major issue these days. Do you think we should be scared?

We indeed are sitting on a huge concern area. For people living in heavily concentrated areas in big cities, this will be biggest killer at one time. All the poor countries are a hub of antibiotic resistance and anyone can easily get an antibiotic drug even when not required. The condition is worse in China and India and major contributor has been the lack of infrastructure. For TB detection, the serological test is banned in India and even harsher laws are very important. Also, we have to double-triple the number of doctors.

Q: The stalemate on Bt crops refuses to die down! What do you think will help in moving things forward?

I think India continues to debate this issue and we are in a longer run losing the plot. Of course the debates are important in a democracy but this debate is seen to be unending. There has to be an end to this debate. Both the parties have to find a common platform on agreeing upon an issue. So far it has not happened. Personally, I am for an objective discussion but at a scientific level, I don't feel for any reason to bring the technology to halt. There might be issue such as involvement of MNCs, monopoly but I would like to focus on scientific aspect which has impeccable evidence in US. It has been 25 years for US and Europe to have initiated the corn and other GM food crops but nothing bad has happened so far. Now China has already given its nod and followed by Bangladesh. From there, it might go to Burma, Thailand and then other countries. Then in resignation we will accept it and say yes. That is illegal but when the seeds come through various sources, you can't do anything. I would say that it is the time, all stakeholders come together on a table to discuss it. Look at it objectively. The whole discussion has been only focused on the Bt brinjal.

Q: Does the target $100 billion target set by industry look achievable by 2025?

It looked achievable one time. But I have very serious doubts if we are going to make it if there is a moratorium on the GM crops and doubts casted on clinical trials. We are good at manufacturing but that has limitations. We were poised to have discovery efforts while the DBT and other agencies continued their efforts. But now there is need to do serious rethinking about galvanizing the sector. I feel 10-15 years, we should be strong enough in monoclonal antibodies for various therapeutic areas.

Important Info:Â

Established as a special project of United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), ICGEB became fully autonomous in 1994. It is divided into three components based in Italy, India and South Africa respectively. As of 2013, the ICGEB statute has been signed by 82 states, most of these developing countries, and of these 62 are currently full members of the Centre. The ICGEB Component in New Delhi, India was established in 1988. With takeover of India component set to happen soon, it is going to be one of India's national institutes with international repute. At present it has 36 Principal Investigators, distributed in 9 different research groups.