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"We are trying a new culture to advocate innovation"

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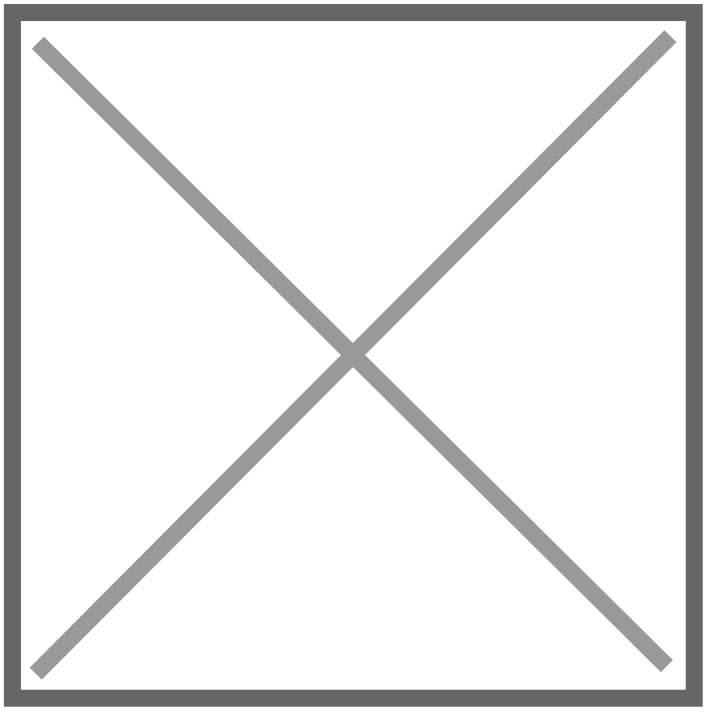

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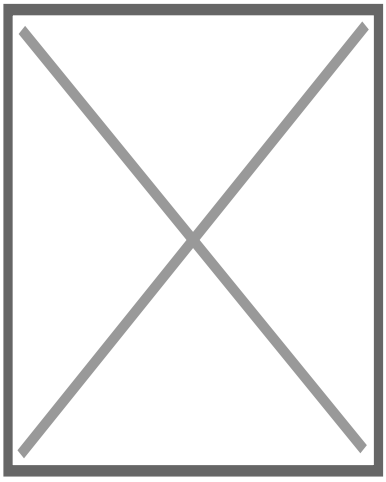

-Dr MK Bhan, secretary, DBT

FICCI in consultation with the DBT has taken an initiative to constitute the industry platforms comprising a group of biotech industry stakeholders, who have keen interest in accelerating the R&D investment in the country, the main purpose being to bring about the much needed innovation and breakthrough much needed by the industry. In an interview, Dr MK Bhan, secretary, Department of Biotechnology, reveals the purpose of the platform, its inspiration from the European Technology Platform and the benefits that will follow for the Indian biotechnology industry. Excerpts:

What benefits will an industry platform bring about to the Indian biotechnology industry? Why is this platform technology-centric?

An industry association or a platform stresses on common interest issues. This particular platform for the biotech industry is technology-centric, backed by the industry. Technology alone can bring about that breakthrough and innovation. It is primarily technology-centric because it intends to come up with an industry-relevant set-up and find a way to implement and fund the industry.

The DBT needs some influence from the industry in terms of identification of research projects for investment. The whole purpose of a platform is to create a research agenda and strategy, identify barriers and bottlenecks, identify better technology, scientific knowledge, better enabling support systems for validation and to be able to implement that agenda in a sustained manner. We are basically trying to promote a new culture to advocate innovation which is not bound by the rules of the DBT, but which is industry-led. So this platform in the process will churn out different types of stakeholders who can use their industry knowledge. However, at the same time it is not a platform where only guidelines are made or submissions offered- there will be discussions and deliberation and the starting point is the technology platform. This platform will tell the DBT on how to spend its money. This platform can also be used to make the much needed breakthrough for the biotech industry. Obviously it is not going to take small issues but it is going to take big projects into consideration. Individual companies cannot do this alone. The industry will also get access to government fund schemes. Companies can participate in key decision-makings and improvisational technology, which are used in changing products. The proposal will be prepared by scientists from across all the companies in the Indian industry.

Why was it decided to look up to the European Technology Platform (ETP) for the Indian platform?

I feel that in any area, nobody addresses top technology costing. Everyone is going for a safe manufacturing opportunity and if I expand investments in an area like stem cell research, the proposals I get are all similar. They examine mechanisms which are important except the innovation that is needed. The industry can create a set of experts that can aid translation of knowledge into something that will eventually be developed into a product. This is how we will become a nation that not only publishes good papers but also a nation which houses innovation. It is the idea which we derived from the ETP.

How will this platform synergize different stakeholders from the industry?

Each platform is a cluster which is a group of people with shared interest and it can be broad or narrow. For example, a self-based developing technology is a good platform. Similarly, implant devices, vaccines and vaccine delivery systems, and therapeutics are other instances. So it would be the issues that will bring about a synergy. The idea is that the members of a platform will have interest in some areas of the principle and concept be it science or technology, or services.

When these similar groups come together, it will create a user-friendly industry. For example in the field of biosimilars, the question will be "should each company develop its own capacity for protein characterization"? For small companies it is going to be hard and even if a company does it by itself, the question again will be "are regulators comfortable"? If it is reconfirmed and validated by a credible service organization that gets government endorsements, it will lead to a creation which will tend to develop a solution which is acceptable to the industry. But with us (government) the danger is that we might establish a platform which is industry-unfriendly and the purpose is lost. So we leave the decision-making to the industry itself who will decide how to create this platform and synergize it.

Is there an apprehension that in the process a company might put forward its own individualistic demands?

It is unlikely for a company to put forward its own demands. Ideas may generate from one person but it has ramifications with other people. Today or maybe after two years, I think each group in the industry will come up with a novel idea, like for instance, the stem cell group had suggested to give somebody a small project to manufacture transportation bags and only an industry-led group can come up with such ideas.

Will international governments be involved in the process?

It is for the platform to decide on any such collaboration and the DBT is not there to tell them the course of their decisions and what should be their interest. They can go for it if it is of interest to them. For example, the European Technology Platform counterpart said that in matters of environment and health, they would be open to developing countries because they felt that it is good to have the involvement of developing countries in these two areas and these are common areas. In the same way for the Indian biotech, the platform will decide and deliberate.

How will a public-private partnership (PPP) help this initiative?

PPP can be a major catalyst for this platform and stakeholders should not get disillusioned by a collaboration with the public sector. Ultimately, it is the quality of the research agenda that matters. Here the challenges for the industry would be while documenting the research agenda about the kind of ideas that should be pooled in. Members will also discover that the documentation process itself has given them tons of ideas. So here people will bring in all the possible resources to create a really in-depth agenda, which will provide the widest global concentration. From the public sector, scientists are one of the resources that can be of great help to the industry and contribute to the industry and guide. So it is all about using all the possible resources for this research agenda.

How will this platform comply with the National Biotech Policy?

This is a part of the same process, whereby it was mentioned in the National Biotech Policy to come up with this industry platform so that the industry churns out innovation. So here it was either the public institute scientists or the industry who would come up with the research agenda and I disagreed because it should be both the sectors. In order to set up a research agenda which is of relevance to them and which the government will fund in a competitive way, we have to have a process by which the best processes are collected. The incentive to them is that research money is channelized to areas where research output can influence industry relations. When the agenda is spread among the scientists in public institutes and the industry, that's when a breakthrough can happen.

What are the future plans as far as the platform is concerned?

I think I will start a couple of platforms in 2008 and we will advertise, make a steering committee and will decide on the process. This industry platform is the base from where other platforms can kickstart. I want to get the cream of the industry. For this I will send a questionnaire to every company in India to assess the areas of maximum interest. In Europe, they spend around $60-70 million on such platforms.

Nayantara Som with Shalini Gupta