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Open source drug discovery

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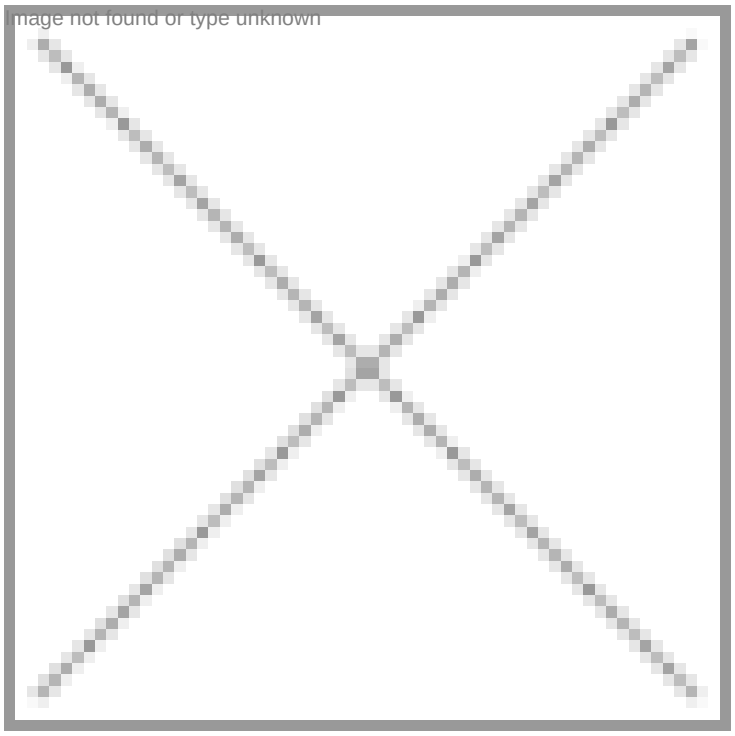
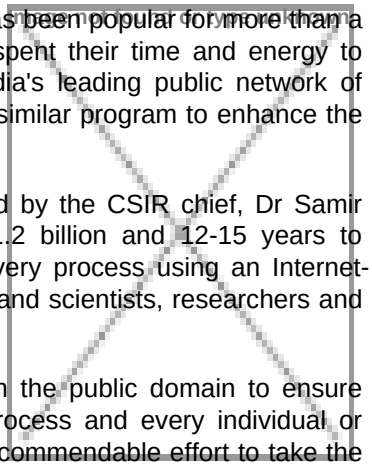


Open source drug discovery

Use of non-proprietary computer software through what are called "Open Source" platforms has been popular for more than a decade. And thousands of communities of software programmers around the world have spent their time and energy to enhance the use of such software to increase the use of reliable free software. Now, India's leading public network of laboratories under the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) has formulated a similar program to enhance the prohibitively expensive drug discovery process.



The $38 million (Rs 160 crore) plan, called Open Source Drug Discovery (OSDD), unveiled by the CSIR chief, Dr Samir Brahmachari, is an innovative attempt to lower the cost of drug discovery from over $1.2 billion and 12-15 years to reasonable levels. OSDD aims to ensure free sharing of information about the drug discovery process using an Internet-enabled platform, The drug discovery process will be broken up into small and simpler tasks and scientists, researchers and students will be able to contribute their own solutions.

All information related to any drug developed under the program will be made available in the public domain to ensure universal access. There will be no intellectual property rights on any component of the process and every individual or company with capabilities will be able commercially exploit the subsequent product. This is a commendable effort to take the mystery out of the drug discovery process.

And those entrepreneurs who plan to serve the humanity by taking up these discoveries by turning them into medicines will

have help from another government agency, the Department of Biotechnology (DBT). The Small Business Innovation Research Initiative (SBIRI), an offshoot of the National Biotechnology Policy, has been trying its best to help such entrepreneurs. So far, the DBT has given over Rs 155 crore to 37 such projects, most of them in the drug discovery area, to 32 companies.

According to the latest data from the DBT, over three-fourths of the 398 fund request proposals have been for early stage drug discovery research and another 20 percent were for scale-up and late stage development of research programs. This is a heartening development which will go a long way in sustaining the growth of the biotechnology segment.

While Indian companies are getting into the drug discovery process with gusto, foreign companies have also started to introduce their latest products in the Indian market. The wait for one of the recent blockbuster drug, Gardasil, the cervical cancer vaccine, marketed by Merck around the world, will be available in India soon. Merck will start the clinical trials of this drug, developed by Australia's top pharma company, CSL. It will be a boon to the millions of young women in the country who could be saved from this dreaded disease with the use of Gardasil. Merck has promised to make it available to the needy Indian patients at affordable rates.

The publishing industry is going through a ferment. Even the most popular television channels have started using content from the viewers, through Citizen Journalist. Some foreign publications have come out with predominantly user generated content (UGC). For over five years now, BioSpectrum has tried to reflect the issues that are of the greatest concern to the biotech community. To take this forward further, the September issue of BioSpectrum will be 100 percent dedicated to User Generated Content. That is every piece of information in it will be what the reader wants and what they provide. So don't wait. Go ahead and flood us with what you would like to see in the September issue. The BioSpectrum team will be involved only to edit the copy and tailor it to the format of the magazine. Happy writing!

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