

## 'The man on mission'

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### 'The man on mission'



BioSpectrum jury for 2013 in a unanimous choice, chose Dr M K Bhan, secretary, DBT for the Lifetime Achievement Award 2013. Dr Bhan was awarded on December 20, 2013 at 11th Annual Awards held at Bangalore. He has provided a new direction, leadership and impetus to the sector. Keeping his motto of serving humanity on, his hands are full with work at the moment. On the behalf of entire biotech community, we wish him all the very best in his future endeavors.

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A perfect mix of a dedicated worker and an inspiring leader, Dr M K Bhan with his extraordinary persona has brought a fresh approach to the way of doing science and handling bureaucracy. His outstanding work as an eminent pediatrician and clinical scientist has created an everlasting impact. His research in the area of diarrhoeal diseases and child nutrition is globally recognized.

He has been the brain behind a rotavirus vaccine, which has not only created a new paradigm on health and international interaction but also put India on path of novel vaccine development. More importantly, his administrative capabilities made the DBT among only few government agencies to be recognized for efficient work. Dr Bhan can be credited for championing programs like Biotechnology Industry Partnership Program (BIPP) and Small Business Industry Research Initiative (SBIRI) to help foster innovation and promote the industry. His execution of the idea and mentorship to the

Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC), has been very well appreciated by the industry. He has played a unique role to open up the government support and involvement for the Indian entrepreneurs to add on biomedical capacities, new diagnostics tools, affordable agricultural techniques among other various things. Scaling up of existing technologies through collaborations within the industry and also academia too is highly relevant for the sector to make an impact on the society in the long run and Dr Bhan has been the biggest advocate of this. He has also promoted bioclusters as

an approach for deeper scientific and business collaboration.

### **Days of fun and learning:**

Born on November 9, 1947 in Kashmir, Dr Bhan spent his childhood days in the midst of religious chants and a much peaceful, serene, poetic environment. He became nostalgic at the mention of valley and remarked, "I grew up among joint family in the beautiful valley, during the times when there used to be much tolerant culture. In those days, life used to be simple and focus was more on the learning part. My parents above all wanted me to be a humble, capable person and allowed me to choose my own way of thinking process. I was given tremendous space to think, choose and develop it. I fortunately had a good mix of education and comfortable upbringing."

While Dr Bhan's father was a civil servant and social worker, his mother was an able homemaker. He expresses his deep gratitude to his late parents who created a systematic mix of love and discipline. "If somebody drowns, you can help him if you know how to swim. Don't learn only for yourself but others too," he recalls his father's words whom he considers his inspiration.

His formal education started at the local mission school in Srinagar, followed by college in Pune and Delhi. Dr Bhan never had patience for classroom learning but there were several teachers who left tremendous influence on his life. Among them, he fondly remembers Dr Shanti Ghosh, who as per him was a wonderful influence during his college days. In the longer run, Dr Bhan acquired a deep interest in community, problem solving, a part of the value system. Mentorship, inspiration and insight into community, life and engagement, traveling, were extremely helpful in shaping his life.

After obtaining his MBBS in the year 1969 from the Armed Forces Medical College, Pune, he went on to do his MD in 1974 from the Delhi University. His areas of specialization included pediatric gastroenterology, pediatric infectious diseases and nutrition. On choosing the medical profession, Dr Bhan says that his love for children was always an inspiration. "Those days there was choice for medical and engineering, I made sure that I was eligible for both but eventually my heart won. The desire to have abstract scholarship versus the desire to serve the needy. Eventually the heart won and he went ahead to study medicine and became a pediatrician.

### **Outstanding, exemplary career**

Dr Bhan held the positions of registrar at the Safdarjung Hospital, New Delhi between 1974-76. senior consultant at the Institute of Child Health, Kabul, Afghanistan from 1976-78. He then served as a lecturer at the Post-graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research, Chandigarh. From 1978-79, he joined All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi as an assistant professor between 1979-81; associate professor between 1981-87 and additional professor from 1987 onwards. His days at AIIMS became highly enriched with experiences of handling children with diarrhoeal symptoms. That was the time, when he discovered a neonatal strain of rotavirus, which later has transformed into India's first indigenous affordable rotavirus vaccine.

After he took charge as the secretary of DBT in 2004, he in his decade long stint brought in new thinking and dynamism to the area of biotechnology. His contribution towards evolving a transparent biotech policy and regulatory regime is a fact that every biotech player in the country is proud of. Under his guidance, special attention was given to forge enduring alliances with a few well chosen countries that lead in innovation and discovery and complement India's strength in biotechnology. He was all for a big expansion of the scientist pool and science activity in industry (small, medium, and large) and through government labs and a smooth flow of ideas, people and knowledge. The purpose of the strategy was to head towards innovation and produce novel products, while capitalizing on the current opportunities in clinical research and biosimilars.

Recalling those days, he mentioned, "At DBT, I had enriching experiences and among them was my first year when I traveled across for devising biotech strategy and engaged with all stakeholders. I realized that knowledge won't be gained in just sitting in govt chamber but by sitting in parks, cafeterias, universities and other open places." It is important to mention that during his interaction with BioSpectrum, Dr Bhan chose to talk more about the sector than himself. He feels that biotech has made good progress and in terms of fulfilling the requirements of poor, the vaccine industry has done outstanding job. "Last year, 7-8 vaccines have been commercialized. It has brought relief to sufferers. Earlier it used to be pharma but now Indian vaccine industry is being admired. In terms of affordable healthcare and generics, we are doing well but could do better, he says.

Dr Bhan has also made major intellectual contribution toward the concept and content development of several major programs of DBT, including, National Biotechnology Development Strategy, National Biotechnology Regulatory Authority, Translational Health Science and Technology Institute in Faridabad. All these initiatives have been aimed at making industry more mature and expand its presence in the country. Currently the development of three clusters at Mohali, Faridabad and Bangalore is underway. Redesigning the strategy consistently is very important for the industry, academia and policymakers to sustain the industry and Dr Bhan was a leader who facilitated all this.

Dr Bhan feels that innovation dependent sector such as biotech cannot thrive well without an enabling ecosystem. He explains, "In terms of public private partnership and academia-industry interaction, the sector is doing much better. If you look at number of projects, DBT's relationship with the industry has grown. Earlier it was affordable innovation but now it is biotoilet, devices, diagnosis, drugs. On the other hand, to sustain the momentum, we need deep pocket science. Particularly, the disease biology and end mechanism. Unless you replicate new targets, the drug development is not going to be an easy task. Lack of high quality drug research is an area of concern."

When asked about the dearth of research aptitude in doctors, Dr Bhan says the question is not about aptitude but the lack of opportunities available to doctors for career path through education and research. "It would be a pity if we are not translating the knowledge acquired over the period of time. Only 1 percent to 2 percent of medical professionals are actually able to turn into researchers. Lets start training the new breed of technologists and make them fit for acquiring knowledge," he says with great optimism. At the moment, Dr Bhan continues to be involved in policy guidance and many research initiatives to improve various vaccine candidates.

### **The Gandhi connect**

A firm believer of Mahatma Gandhi's principles, he in his early days got to read a lot on Mahatma leaving a long lasting impression on his mind. Even today whenever in doubt, he likes to read his books and quotes. He explains, "Where genius begins, logic fails and Gandhiji's perception was beyond the logic. He reached out to the grassroots of society to understand their pain. He saw science and technology as an area that must center around the improvement of human lives. He saw the value in everything, whether knowledge, wealth, or human dignity.

Whenever, I am distressed and unsure, I turn to him and keep going." Being highly social in nature, Dr Bhan has hoards of friends with whom he likes to spend time whenever free. He has a passion for sports and fondness of watching European football league keeps him awake in the night. He philosophically says, "These processes that help you bring out best in a human being, is reflected in sports, science and other areas too. I find all of it connected."

### **A family of problem solvers**

He met his wife, Mrs Girija K Bhan at SOS Children's Village, an NGO for orphans founded by his father in law. He used to go there as an medical intern while she was studying overseas at that time but used to visit occasionally. After an initial courtship, their mothers decided that it was great match. "She has been great partner all the while and tolerating my busy schedule, " he says about his wife who is an MBA and doubles up as a social worker and a homemaker. The couple is blessed with a son and a daughter. While his son has done doctorate in city urban life with interest in designing of the cities and inputs for the development, daughter who studies at Atlanta in innovation in public good. A proud father, husband, son and son in law, he feels happy that all his family and relations have been problem solvers.

### **Close colleagues recall their association:**

"Have not only known Dr Bhan as the secretary but as a person who is a dear friend and colleague. His dedication and single handed efforts to boost innovative research in India and create infrastructure for future, are praiseworthy. Indian biotech sector has been lucky enough to have such an effective scientist and an administrator."

Dr Virender Chauhan, director, ICGEB

"Great credit goes to Dr Bhan for transforming the actual profile of Indian biotech sector and also help in laying foundation for life science education. His association with the important research programmes and establishment of institutional structure has taken these fruits to the industry. His role as the mentor of BIRAC as an interface between academia and industry, has been outstanding. Though no single award can be enough to match his efforts, this recognition to Dr Bhan by BioSpectrum is surely a matter of joy to all of us as this recognition is not just by it but the entire community in general. The magazine has been successful in establishing the bridge between the industry and academia by opening the dialogue in the biotech sphere. It has served as a platform for various stakeholders to communicate their viewpoint. "

Dr Vijay K Raghavan, secretary, DBT