

Dr Swati Piramal - Quest, A way of Life

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"All men seek one goal: success or happiness. The only way to achieve true success is to express yourself completely in service to society. First, have a definite, clear, practical ideal—a goal, an objective. Second, have the necessary means to achieve your ends—wisdom, money, material and methods. Third, adjust all your means to that end,"

-Aristotle



If this is a mantra of success, the life and career of Dr Swati Piramal would tell why she is successful. She did not want to do the obvious. So she did not pursue "just" a medical career. She braced medicine with research. A doctor from University of Bombay, she joined Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, to learn and understand the happenings in pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries.

Passion drives her. She is passionate about research activities taking place in herbal, clinical discovery and nutrition research in pharmaceuticals. Passionate about providing easy access and low-cost healthcare to the under privileged children. Her specific research interest areas include malaria, tuberculosis, AIDS, and diabetes. Knowledge, passion, and compassion have taken her to where she is today. She heads one of the country's leading pharmaceutical company, Nicholas Piramal India Ltd, as director - strategic alliance and communications.

Her responsibilities include R&D, information technology, medical services and knowledge management for the healthcare group of Piramal Enterprises.

Initial achievements

"In the first half of 1980's, that is, during my early professional days, Parel, where we have our company headquarters, had over 25,000 cases of polio. Looking at the gravity I initiated awareness campaigns in 1982 by organizing plays, skits etc. The campaigns have yielded results over the years. And in 1990, the 'city of mills' was declared as 'no-polio zone'. I was amazed with the results. As a reward to the women of the city, I distributed one-meter cloth to all to prepare dresses for their children. I was thrilled to see the kids in colorful attires laying at the city" recalls Dr Piramal.

This tech savvy doctor, heading the task force for rapid implementation of information and technology research strategy at Nicholas Piramal, succeeded in ensuring that all manufacturing sites were ready on Y2K and were ERP enabled. Under her leadership, a vast wide area network using VSAT technology was put in place. She has set up 12 cyber cafes in the country for training and knowledge management of medical field representatives and doctors, started the data-warehousing solutions to manage large data bytes of information in the healthcare industry, and started a new project to implement web enabled e-business solutions.

About her initiatives in implementation of IT strategy she said, "my core belief in science and technology helped me set up cyber cafes in 1992, when few had heard about it. The objective was to help the medical representatives and doctors. We have over 250 products in our list in different categories. The cyber cafes helped us to interact with field representatives and doctors about our products. And to support them to take proper decisions at the right time. This is purely for interaction."

Looking ahead

Under her leadership, Piramal Enterprises has made significant progress in discovery research, chemical process development and biotechnology. Clinical research for planning clinical trials, new drug protocols and pharmacokinetics labs, herbal research for DNA fingerprinting and standardization of ayurveda, the setting up of a business driven R & D program in the company (BDRD) and contract research and technology partnerships with some of the leading companies in the world are her latest achievements.

Biotech initiatives

"We have a Biotek division. It markets life saving and critical care products of F. Hoffmann-La Roche, Switzerland and NeXstar Pharmaceuticals Inc., USA. It all started in 1994, when two products – Neupogen and Roferon-A – were launched to enter the biotechnology field. After operating under Piramal Healthcare Limited for about two years, in January 1997, we hived off the Biotek division into a separate strategic business unit primarily to focus on its key brands, improve marketing and services of high tech products and better visibility in the market place. The core purpose of the division is to improve patients' well being by making available to the doctors latest therapies with the launch of original research molecules. Since its inception, the division has launched 12 new products. On an average that's a new product every five months. A remarkable success rate in this complex and critical field covering many areas of human medicine including oncology, virology and nephrology," she said.

She added that Roche and NeXstar being the forerunners of biotechnology, the Biotek division is set to launch several new products and is poised for a quantum leap in near future.

Foray into biopharma

Dr Piramal was part of the management team at Piramal Enterprises that acquired the Hoechst Marion Roussel Research Centre in Bombay and set up the new Quest Institute of LifeSciences and the Wellspring Clinical Facility in Mumbai. "The acquisitions played a catalytic role for our success. We never looked back after we acquired Nicholas Laboratories from the UK-based Aspro Nicholas group in 1988. It has also supported us to move up the ladder by pushing down the competitors," said Dr Piramal.

Acquisition of Rhone-Poulenc India has catapulted the organization to the second position with a market share of about five per cent. The number of Piramal brands in the ORG-MARG of Top 300 pharma brands jumped to 16, putting it just behind Glaxo-SmithKline with 21 products. Prior to the acquisition, the company shared the second rank with Cipla and Ranbaxy with 12 products.

"The focus of our basic research is the development of New Chemical Entities (NCE) in select therapeutic areas. In addition to this oncology compound, development is underway for five NCE compounds - cardiovascular (2), diabetes (1) and anti-fungal (1) and cancer (1). We have already filed our first patent for a NCE – an anti-cancer molecule NP102. The new molecule is a cyclin-dependent kinase 4 (CDK4) inhibitor. We are nearing the completion of the first phase of the 12-year project. Each project cost is estimated at Rs 12 crore ", said Dr Piramal

"Being the director, I will do my homework properly to take the organization to the forefront of the industry. I do read a lot to learn and understand different emerging fields. Graduation with master's degree from Boston helped me to understand areas like biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, and law as well. This has pushed me to initiate steps to implement the IT, KM and medical services in the organization. It is all because of the support from my family members - parents, children, husband, in-

laws."

Despite the hectic professional life, she spares enough quality time for her daughter who works with the leading management consultancy McKinsey in Mumbai and the son who is still in college.

Recognition

Recognizing her specialization, the government of India has appointed Dr Piramal as a member of a special committee set up to transform India into a knowledge power. She has been the vice-chairperson of the Biotechnology Advisory Board set up by the Department of Biotechnology. Considering her active role in the progress and development of biotechnology in Maharashtra, she has been asked to lead the Maharashtra's Maha BioYatra, "Bio Wednesday forum", a joint venture of Confederation of Indian Industry and government of Maharashtra. She received the ChemTech -Cew 2003 (biotech industry) achiever of year Award. Happy about receiving the award, she said, "the recognition has encouraged me to take up more initiatives so that benefits of science and technology could reach the poor people. "

Proud to be an integral part of Mumbai, Dr Piramal said, "I want to do something for the nation. I am planning to take up a project that could change the life of the rural folk in Rajasthan. The project is already under the drawing board. "

Areas of interest

She has co-authored a book on nutrition and health along with Tarla Dalal titled "Eat Your Way to Good Health." Another book titled Diet & Nutrition Guide for Patients with Renal Disease and Related Disorders was co-authored with Dr Vidya N. Acharya. She has published articles in many leading publications. Apart from writing books Dr Piramal said, "I love cooking, reading, writing scripts for television, photography and poetry. At present I am studying folk poetry, particularly the works of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. "

[Narayan Kulkarni](#)

"Besides a strong biotech policy, Maharashtra's Maha BioYatra is a major move"



In a conversation with Narayan Kulkarni of BioSpectrum, Dr Swati Piramal explained the biotech opportunities in Maharashtra, the state government initiatives, and the reasons for lack of funding to the biotech industry and its growth in India.

What are the initiatives to push up biotech industry in Maharashtra?

Besides a strong and clear biotech policy, Maharashtra's Maha BioYatra is a major move. Under this program the state government along with Confederation of Indian Industry has launched BioWednesday network forum. The forum provides a platform for the industry people to discuss issues ranging from funding to marketing in the fields of life sciences, genomics, medicine, bioinformatics, agribiotech, marine biotechnology and understanding to patenting. During this monthly meet, we invite experts on varied subjects. And we discuss a lot of other industry-related issues.

Apart from this we in Maharashtra observe 14 November, the birth anniversary of Jawaharlal Nehru, as the Biotechnology Day. The purpose of observing the day is to carry the message that biotechnology can be a key life care tool of the twenty first century to the public at large by improving food, health, environment etc in a major way.

How is Maha BioYatra helping the industry?

Maha BioYatra - a network forum is acting as a communications and marketing network for Maharashtra's bioscience community. It enables corporate, researchers and scientists to exchange ideas, share opportunities and develop potential business partnerships and learn from each other. As the forum addresses issues like how we can build trust amongst users and consumers, what road map can we use to surge forward, what are the policies that are needed to encourage this sector, how we can apply biotechnology to improve food grain output, People involved in different walks of the society like VCs, policy makers, doctors, experts and scientists, financial institutions, consulting companies will benefit..

At one of the regular meetings of BioWednesday network forum, a company with many products in its basket approached me for assistance. The company has come out with industrial enzymes. As my organization is not into commercialization of the industrial enzymes, I discussed the matter with other members and suggested whom to contact. This has solved the problem.

Why venture funding is not taking place in biotech in a big way?

People are not convinced about the viability of projects, the quality of the clinical trials in India and the regulatory standards. I think the problems will vanish when we have a few success stories and we have a few things that have beaten the world, or are being sold in the world markets. A drug, which is produced in India and has a global market would be a dream for any VC. They will come running then. I think it is just a matter of time.

