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13 December 2007 | News



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-Dr Rama Mukerjee, founder, Ara Healthcare, Gurgaon

Dr Rama Mukerjee has been the brain behind Dabur Research for quite a few years where she headed the R&D unit and came up with new and innovative products. She is now all set to synergize her scientific capabilities coupled with entrepreneurial spirit as she takes on the mantle of heading her own company, Ara Healthcare, an innovation driven organization that would focus on the commercialization of research.

The company based in Gurgaon will soon be operational. Dr Mukerjee has got together a team of six scientists from Dabur and recruitment is on to ensure that Ara is 30-people strong by this year-end. They already have three molecules from Dabur (for cancer) for further development out of which two are NMEs and the third is a biological entity. The company will also focus on developing leads for autoimmune diseases, diabetes and obesity, infectious diseases and genetic disorders.

In an exclusive interview with BioSpectrum, Dr Rama Mukerjee talks about her vision for the company and much more. Some excerpts:

What was the vision behind coming up with a new company?

The company has been in existence for the last four years. We did a couple of projects and I carried out a survey on Indian

R&D and we realized that there isn't innovative R&D in India. That really stimulated me to get into innovative R&D. I thought we could be somewhere in the global map for developing significant number of novel products. I could not develop them alone, but I could develop some of them and that was the motivation. Also in the post genomic era, we are yet to utilize genomic applications in our drugs, therapy or diagnostic applications. Also, if you see all large molecules in the market, the blockbusters, somebody picked them up and built on them and then outlicensed them to large pharma. I found this very attractive, exciting and challenging.

What will be the core competency of Ara Healthcare?

We are looking at competency in molecular biology, i.e. developing NMEs (new molecular entities), recombinant proteins, humanized antibodies and the like. It will be partly drug discovery, but a lot on product development in terms of preclinical and phase I development of the product. We would like to take the leads from universities and research institutes at a very early stage, then do further discovery to find out at what stage is it, is it a hit or at a very early lead stage. Then we would optimize and look up and build the lead and then take it forward for preclinical and phase I. Optimization may also involve coming up with a better molecule. Basically we would like to see the early discovery with universities and research institutions where we will have very close tie-ups.

How would you describe the business model of the company?

There are three things that we are looking at. In order to generate revenue for the first few years, we will provide molecular diagnostic services like real time PCR, sequencing technology and chromosomal analysis. We hope to become a strong reference lab people would refer to where we can provide testing for infectious disease, cancer and genetic disorders. This would not only be our revenue earner for the first few years but would also provide us valuable information that we could utilize for our R&D program.

About 25 percent of our activity would be on contract research. We would be willing to do protein formulation and protein product development as that would further add to our skill set and capability. Basically we want to develop the expertise around developing the product along preclinical and phase I and outlicense it.

How different would Ara Healthcare be from other biotech companies? What would be its USP?

One is the company's focus on NMEs i.e. biotherapeutics and humanized antibodies along with molecular diagnostics which is something unique to our company. Second, we are not a CRO. Majority of the companies in India are doing that. This is how we differentiate ourselves from other companies. We are looking at building our own products and so building our own value-added capabilities. If someone comes to us with an observation to get a product made on these lines, we would be ready to work on it. We would proactively go and get products from universities and research institutions, evaluate them, bring them and work. We hope that big pharma and financial institutions will come to take equity and support us.

Shalini Gupta