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'Indian pharma industry must focus on becoming a powerhouse of innovation'

*Polyclone Bioservices is an important growth partner of many drug discovery companies. **Sanjay Bettadpura**, Chief Business Officer, Polyclone Bioservices, opines on drug discovery scenario in India, in discussion with **Sachin Jagdale***

Does the name 'Polyclone' specify any particular scientific activity?



'Polyclone' represents our focus on integrated biology based discovery research. It communicates our ability to synergise various aspects of biology including computational, molecular and cell based approaches, to address the challenges of cancer drug discovery and therapy. Most importantly, it conveys our vision to scale into a full-fledged cancer therapy company.

What are the different sections of the pharma industry that you cater to?

We cater to two important segments of the pharma industry: target discovery and stem cell therapy. Though at the opposite ends of the spectrum, the common underlying basis is our expertise in biology and focus on cancer.

List the factors that can speed up the drug discovery process in India?

There are two aspects to this and at Polyclone we believe that both of these are non-scientific. The first factor relates to how the industry defines its business objectives and how companies and research institutions work together to leverage on mutual capabilities. For true drug discovery to happen in India, the business focus should be on real value generation. This translates to developing affordable and innovative drugs to address Indian healthcare challenges. With this as the focus, companies and research institutions need to evolve collaborative models that can exploit Indian scientific ingenuity and commercial tact. This would most definitely accelerate drug discovery in India, as opposed to the largely service model prevalent at present. The second aspect is about the culture of innovation, which is critical for drug discovery. From the present approach of 'Jugaad' (or incremental innovation/ re-engineering) we have to build companies and teams that thrive on systematic innovation (as emphasised by Dr Rishiksha T Krishnan in his book titled "From Jugaad to Systematic Innovation").

What is the difference between drug discovery sector in India and abroad?

The key differences, as would be evident from the above point,



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are the way that our bio-pharma companies define their business objectives, the culture of systematic innovation and an investment community that funds true discovery as opposed to short-term monetary gains.

What are the key problems for Indian pharma industry?

The Indian pharma industry has been catering to the need for low cost re-engineered drugs for the masses and that has been and is being met. Now the industry must focus on becoming a powerhouse of innovation to address the new needs of the masses - affordable and specific treatments that meet global regulatory standards. If this is not addressed, the Indian pharma industry would largely remain a generics (and bio-similars) and services player. For this to change a concerted paradigm shift needs to be orchestrated by the industry, Department of Biotechnology (DBT)/ Department of Science and Technology (DST)/ Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), the Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) and the investment communities.

How is the gene pool of Indian population beneficial in drug discovery process?

The Indian population consists of many sub populations that have been studied to be similar to several global races (European, South Asian, East Asian, African etc). The diversity, size and the fact that a huge percentage of them are treatment naïve makes the Indian population a great gene pool to work on. Additional factors that make them attractive for research are the diverse environmental and life-style related stresses across India, that replicate global conditions. This also contributes well for epigenetics related studies.

What are your offerings to biotech industry?

Target discovery and validation through a combination of in silico and in vitro approaches; therapeutic and diagnostic assay design and validation; cell and stem cell based assays for lead validation; in silico structural studies and bioinformatics algorithm development.

Who are your competitors?

There is no one competitor who provides the solutions as we do, however, in each of the different segments there are specific bioinformatics companies and biotech companies who offer parts of the solution that our customers require.

How will your responsibilities as a provider of drug discovery services change in the coming years?

As of today, we provide point solution to our customers, whether it is assessment of a thermodynamic stability of a protein, optimal probe library for a specific cancer family or a study of apoptotic pathway to assess tumour progression in stem cells. But with more Indian companies trying to evolve long term strategies for drug discovery and development, the role of a company like ours will be to provide a strategic approach for the most optimal discovery pipeline by leveraging the ecosystem and technologies that are already available.

Are facilitators of drug discovery like yourself more

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trusted overseas than in India?

Trust is many times a reflection of one's values. Typical family owned businesses with centralised decision making, find it hard to spend/budget on something that is not so tangible. Most companies in developed countries are driven by strategy and research and strive to create stakeholder value as opposed to just gains for the owners. Strategic investments are common to the extent that mergers and acquisitions are the rule in the biotech industry and not the exception. This is slowly changing in India too, with a recent case in point being the strategic investment that Cipla made in Stempeutics.

More than trust it's how Indian companies see value in such partnerships. Many of them still do not recognise the costs and challenges of true innovation, including the higher salaries that need to be paid to retain PhD and Post Doc talent and the investments required to instill a research culture to keep the talent motivated. As long as they evaluate services purely on a cost basis they wouldn't be able to derive true value. Overseas companies have matured and are able to exploit outsourcing models for accelerating research and scaling up rather than just bringing down costs. Naturally, we are able to attract more Indian customers, because of the global customers that we have.

Who are your clients?

We work with drug discovery companies, biotech platform companies and biotech reagent suppliers.

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