

Collaborations key to India's healthcare sector

A month after the Narendra Modi government took charge in New Delhi, healthcare experts from India and the US gathered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for the annual US-India BioPharma and Healthcare Summit on June 28, 2014. The mood was somber just the way it had been at this much-awaited event in the last two years. For the promise of great collaborations between the two countries in the healthcare arena had yet to make significant progress in the last decade.

“My input from India is that things have become worse. But policy makers say things are now stabilizing with the change of government,” intoned Mr Karun Rishi, president, USA-India Chamber of Commerce(USAIC), based in Boston and the main organizer of the annual conference which started on a positive note eight years ago to foster Indo-US co-operation. “There is a disconnect between the policy prescriptions and the ground realities of its implementation particularly in the last two years.”

Mr Rishi was candid. “Without this



Key speakers at the US-India BioPharma & Healthcare summit

disconnect disappearing nothing much can happen on this front immediately,” he added.

The healthcare industry in the US and India are primarily worried about two issues. One, the near collapse of the clinical trial sector in India with negligible approvals for new trials in the last two years due to policy paralysis induced by activist NGOs and court directives. Two, the moribund status of the biotech regulatory system which has been in a near comatose state in India.

Why have we come to this state, wondered Dr Raju Kucherlapati, professor of genetics, Harvard Medical School and co-ordinator of the day-

long event. The diseases that affect people in both the countries are similar. All the top 50 pharma companies in the world have significant presence in India. “Yet Indians are not getting the benefits of the latest medicines,” Dr Kucherlapati noted.

India's annual generics medicines exports are more than \$10 billion and are growing at 21 per cent. “By 2020, the exports will cross the \$20 billion mark,” Dr Kucherlapati said. His suggestion: A transformative change in relations need to take place with more industry-academia collaborations between India and the US.

It was then left to India's chief biotech policy maker, Prof. K Vi-

jayraghavan, secretary, Department of Biotechnology (DBT), to turn the discussion around towards future prospects. In his keynote address, he admitted the existence of various problems. But Prof. VijayRaghavan pointed to the sunny side of things. “All the problems you hear about today are actually opportunities if solutions put people and their problems at the center.”

Prof. VijayRaghavan was candid when he said India’s pharma and biotech sectors have been somewhat neglected. The sector had a compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of 26 percent between 2006 and 2013. India will be the world’s 6th largest (from the current 10th) pharma market in the world with revenue in excess of \$45 billion, he noted.

His solution: transformative collaborations in the area of Pharmaresearch and development (R&D) between industry and academia. Europe has done this successfully, he pointed out. He also wanted the Indian industry to match the government’s annual investment of one percent of GDP for R&D.

The day-long event had an interesting session on biologics and biosimilars. Dr Mark Schenerman, VP at MedImmune, advocated harmonization of regulatory systems globally to ensure integrity of development and production process of biologics and biosimilars.

The future prospects will be based on partnerships with everyone sharing institutional knowledge without compromising on intellectual property rights. Two other key elements for greater use of biosimilars are the integrity of the supply chain of ingredients and production, and the capacity management of organizations that are involved in the sector to handle internal and external link-



ages most efficiently.

Mr KV Balasubramaniam, CEO of Reliance Life Sciences, India, highlighted the benefits provided by biosimilars in increasing access to much needed modern medicines. He flagged the issues related to batch variations in these products. The key, he said, is for biosimilar manufacturers to ensure that the right clinical outcomes are achieved.

This was one of the running themes in various panel discussions during the event. Dr Willam Chin, executive VP at PhRMA, the industry association put it succinctly, “We have to be aware that even the most innovative medical products have to finally reach the people.”

Added Dr Karen Antman, dean and provost, Boston University School of Medicine, “USA can learn a lot from India and contribute through research. In India, doctors are too busy with patient care. On the other hand, in the US we are dealing with shortage of patients.”

The event had a galaxy of speakers from the industry and academia from both the countries. There were wide-ranging discussions on drug discovery and collaborative research, cardiovascular and metabolic diseases with reference to the increased cases

in India.

An interesting session on Reimagining India, with the author of the McKinsey-published book of the same name, Mr Adil Zainulbhai during lunch had some interesting case studies that drew parallels between the rise of China three decades ago and how India’s rise is starting now. Dr Yasheng Huang, professor at the Sloan School of Management, outlined his studies that showed that a democratic society alone does not guarantee rapid economic growth. It should be supplemented by labor market reforms and investment in human resources for skill upgradation. Physical infrastructure alone is not enough for rapid growth. He said India’s rise will be directly linked to investment in human resources.

China, he said, got investments in physical infrastructure and human capital right three decades ago. India has not found that balance and lagged in physical infrastructure. While China has annual budget surpluses, India runs 4-5 percent deficit budgets. In the 1960s, India was even ahead of China in physical infrastructure. But China invested hugely in human resources along with physical infrastructure. India did not find the right balance since then and hence trying to catch up now in infrastructure development.

The event concluded with a scintillating talk by celebrated MIT biologist, Dr Robert Langer, who narrated his exploits in combining high science with product innovation to create dozens of highly acclaimed solutions to many every day problems facing people. McKinsey released its revised study on Reimagining India’s role in delivering affordable biopharma innovation, commissioned specially by USAIC. **BS**

BY NARAYANAN SURESH
IN CAMBRIDGE, USA