IN brief

Wellcome partners with India

A £45 ($70) million fifty-fifty partnership between the UK's Wellcome Trust and India's Department of Biotechnology (DBT) to support development of "affordable healthcare products" is just the kind of boost small Indian biotech companies hankered after. The initiative announced 29 July builds on the existing £80 ($124) million alliance launched in 2008 to strengthen the biomedical research base in India (*Nat. Biotechnol.* **26**, 1202, 2008). The added impetus is for translating research into medical products "that are not totally market driven but are required by people at [an] affordable price," says DBT secretary Maharaj Kishan Bhan. Venture capitalists usually shy away from backing products that do not have a big market, he says, and the new partnership plugs this gap. Chandrasekhar Nair, director of Bigtec, a Bangalore-based startup, which has developed a diagnostic handheld microarray is investigating biomarker detection for early identification of chronic diseases. Nair says that under the Wellcome-DBT alliance his company may consider sourcing microfluidics capabilities from UK universities to fast-track the device's development. Banda Ravi Kumar of XCyton Diagnostics, Bangalore, says a government loan enabled the initial development of their diagnostic DNA Macro Chips device. "Thanks to the new initiative, we are looking actively to develop another such platform for oncology with Oxford Biodynamics that has an epigenetics-based technology," he says. *Killugudi Jayaraman*

Hungary eyes biotech jobs

The Hungarian Ministry for National Economy has unveiled a $4.5 billion scheme aimed at creating one million jobs within ten years. The New Széchenyi Development Plan will bolster small and medium enterprises (SMEs) across all industries, including biotech. The launch of a series of consultations, slated for September 2011, will provide SMEs with resources from local government and EU funds by 2013. The key points include developing healthcare and 'green' industries, improving science and innovation, promoting business growth, and investing in housing, employment and transport. "What we see is promising, but the plan is only one piece of the policy. We need to see how it will work all together, " notes Ernö Duda, CEO of SOLVO, headquartered in Budapest, and founder and president of the Hungarian Biotechnology Association. "It is still too early to say how much of the funding will go into the biotechnology industry, but we hope that the government will recognize that while biotechnology is a small sector, it is growing—even while Hungary was in recession, the biotechnology sector grew by around 50% a year," says Duda. The Hungarian Biotechnology Association, which was founded only seven years ago and already has over 100 members; has compiled a strategic report on the biotech industry for the government. "We see the Széchenyi plan as being in line with our strategy, and we feel that this will give the industry a boost," says Duda. *Suzanne Elvidge*

ments at the institute." What's more, the small manufacturing plant has produced the clinical grade material needed to move projects from preclinical research into phase 1/2 clinical trials, she adds.

Another pilot bioproduction facility success is the Japanese encephalitis virus (JEV) purified-inactivated vaccine, manufactured and distributed as Ixiaro (inactivated JEV strain SA14-14-2 with aluminum hydroxide adjuvant). Ixiaro received US Food and Drug Administration approval last year, and is now distributed and manufactured in the US by Novartis of Basel under license from Intercell of Vienna.

Ken Eckels, who leads the research team at the Walter Reed pilot facility, has no doubt that biomanufacturing units springing up in publicly funded organizations provide a valuable service. The key, he says, is keeping up with regulatory protocols such as current good manufacturing practice and ensuring that the appropriate quality control and quality assurance checks are in place.

Nidhi Subbaraman *Boston*

Monsanto relaxes restrictions on sharing seeds for research

Public sector scientists who complained last year that seed companies were curbing their rights to study commercial biotech crops are negotiating research agreements with industry. In August, the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), an agency within the US Department of Agriculture in Washington, DC, finalized an umbrella license with St. Louis-based Monsanto that gives ARS scientists the freedom to study Monsanto's commercial seeds without asking the company for permission on each project. "[The agreement] is extremely good and specific. ARS will be allowed to do basically everything that could be desired," says one ARS scientist who asked to remain anonymous.

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Agronomic research scientists are now free to study Monsanto's commercial seeds.

ARS scientists were part of a group of 26 researchers who lodged an anonymous public complaint in February 2009 that charged that seed companies were thwarting public sector research. They said a legal contract called a "stewardship agreement" forbid research from being conducted on the companies' crops and seeds, no matter how they were obtained. The scientists said they felt forced to seek permission from the seed companies before conducting studies, even on crops that had been on the market for years (*Nat. Biotechnol.* **27**, 880–882, 2009). "No truly independent research can be legally conducted on many critical questions involving these crops" because of company-imposed restrictions, the scientists wrote in their public comment.

In response to the complaint and the press reports that followed, seed companies reexamined their research agreements with the public sector. Indianapolis-based Dow AgroSciences, Basel-based Syngenta and Johnston, Iowa–based Pioneer Hi-Bred have all begun discussions with ARS over new umbrella agreements, according to the companies. These industry players, along with Monsanto, have also been working with universities on similar licenses.

The Monsanto-ARS agreement obtained by *Nature Biotechnology* allows ARS scientists to conduct agronomic research—studies on how crops interact with local environments and which varieties perform best. Studies outside of agronomic research, such as breeding, reverse engineering or characterizing the genetic composition of the crop, require separate contracts with the company. The agreement is nearly identical in scope to Monsanto's licenses with universities, but is more specific. An appendix included in ARS's license lists more than 25 examples of the specific types of studies that are considered "agronomic" and therefore permissible—a definition that has been unclear to public sector scientists in the past. "It allows us to do our research under a blanket agreement instead of negotiating everything [with Monsanto] every time," says Larry Chandler, an area director at ARS who facilitated the negotiations. "This is much more efficient for all parties."

Emily Waltz *Nashville, Tennessee*