

"We need policies for building capacity in new drug discovery & development arena"

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As India takes baby steps in the field of drug discovery, it becomes crucial that the government steps up and provides requisite support to usher in a conducive environment for pharma companies to excel. In conversation with BioSpectrum, Suneela Thatte, VP and Head – R& Excellence Centre, Merck India shares her views in this regard.

What are your view on the slow pace in drug discovery in the country?

While India is a country that houses 16% of global population and 20% of global disease burden, we have never had a drug development agenda of our own, focusing on our healthcare needs. Today we as a country have traditional diseases of developing economy such as infections and nutritional disorders, lifestyle related diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, cancers etc. which are more characteristic of developed economy as well as newer healthcare challenges associated with the pandemic. However since we have always depended on western world for new drugs and innovative healthcare solutions, we

have not focused on building capabilities and capacity in new drug discovery and development arena. This needs immediate attention and with policies that promote innovation, industry – government- academia partnerships and focus on skill development, we can certainly make a mark on the global innovation landscape – the manner in which Indian scientists, industry and government responded to the challenges posed by ongoing pandemic and developed vaccines – not only for India but for the world – is a great example that showcases our capability of innovation.

What are the current challenges in the drug discovery space?

Due to lack of focus on innovation, we do not have enough skilled researchers as well as research facilities. We do not have policies supporting organizations in private and public space who wish to get into innovation and drug development. Lastly – there is little support available to academic researchers and very few opportunities for them to partner with industry and take their research to a scalable level – this needs focused attention and policy interventions.

What would be your expectations from the government in this regard?

- Create opportunities for industry -government – academia partnerships to promote research and innovation
- Support industries which support drug development and innovation – pharma companies, labs, preclinical testing facilities, clinical research site etc by way of supportive policies and investment where relevant
- Taxation relief for innovators / R&D players
- Financial support to small biotechs / academia – especially in areas of relevance to India.

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