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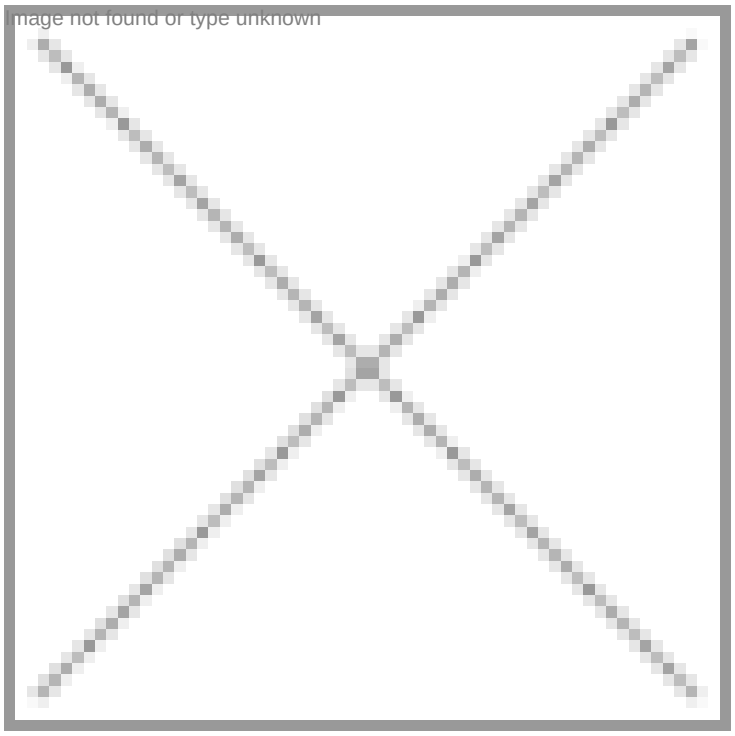
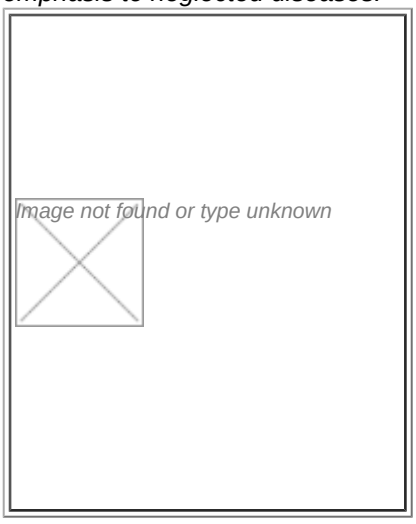


DST to fund research projects on neglected diseases

The Department of Science and Technology (DST) has introduced a scheme to fund end-to-end clinical trials that gives emphasis to neglected diseases.



Keeping in mind the spiraling cost of clinical trials and the need for vigorous and accelerated research, the Department of Science and Technology (DST) has launched a program, which will aim to allot funds for end-to-end clinical trials to companies and institutions that come out with a solution for neglected diseases. This initiative is a part of an overall scheme called the Drugs and Pharmaceutical Research Programme (DPRP) headed by the ministry of science and technology, with the aim to accelerate collaborative R&D projects in the drugs and pharmaceutical industries. Till date, in India, only a handful of companies (both Indian as well as multi-national companies have taken up the initiative to come up with promising answers to the concerns raised by the neglected diseases.

Throwing light on the initiative Dr GJ Samathanam, advisor, technology transfer, DST said, “India is a country where a number of tropical diseases are predominantly present. MNCs are reluctant to undertake initiatives to conduct clinical trails in this field and they are always eager to come up with molecules for diseases, which can be applied to any geography. So, Indian companies have to take the initiative to protect people from tropical diseases.”

Some of the exceptional instances in this regard are the collaboration between Tata group owned, Advinus Therapuetics and US-based Biotech Company, Genzyme to enhance the discovery of novel therapies for malaria and the announcement from Kewal Handa, managing director of Pfizer about the company’s decision to focus on malaria clinical trials in India. The DST has kick started the scheme by identifying four neglected diseases, three of them being tuberculosis, malaria and kalaazar. However the exact amount of the funding was not revealed. Dr Samathanam just hinted that substantial amount would be allotted but he didn’t gave any specific figures.

“Now two companies have applied for the funds under this scheme. Ranbaxy, which is conducting clinical trials of malaria (which is in its advanced stage) and Bharat Serums and Vaccines, which has applied for kalaazar, a disease which is highly prevalent in the state like Bihar,” said Dr Samathanam.

The criteria and the process of applying for this scheme are very simple. After a company submits its proposal, it goes through a peer committee that will evaluate on how promising the molecule is and most importantly as to whether it can be applied to the neglected disease profile of the Indian populace. Project proposals are reviewed in strict confidence by a specialist and later by an expert committee. The budget needed for the entire clinical trial phase is then estimated. Indian companies engaged in drug development jointly with a national laboratory under the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), a university or any other academic department and publicly funded R&D institutions are eligible to apply for the scheme.

This initiative by DST is a solution to some of the major concerns confronting the clinical trial industry in India. “The problem with the clinical trials industry in India is that the companies or Contract Research Organizations (CROs), unfortunately target the same diseases and the same human populace for human trials. In order to tackle the situation DST is joining hands with the industry to address these sensitive issues confronting the industry,” Dr GJ Samathanam pointed out.

Apart from this, the DST is actively involved in providing funds for clinical trials in other fields such as vaccines and diagnostics. This includes development of preventive and therapeutic third generation recombinant Hepatitis B vaccine, development of recombinant vaccines against rabies, development of indigenous ELISA kits based on capsid antigen capture assay for HIV-1 and HIV-2 and the development of indigenous and cost-effective CD4 and CD8 count assay for HIV/AIDS.

One of the significant achievements of DST was a peptide-based anti-cancer drug for the treatment of colorectal cancer by the Dabur Research Foundation under Phase-III clinical trials. Also, the DST has roped in 85 industry—academia alliances under Drugs and Pharmaceutical Research Programme.

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