

Aiming for Australia-India synergistic collaboration in Life Sciences Sector

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To advance trade and investment links with India, the Australia India Business Exchange (AIBX) 2021 programme has been launched. AIBX is the Australian Government's flagship business exchange programme aimed at growing two-way business literacy and commercial partnerships between Australia and India. In the healthcare sector, there are opportunities for Australian and Indian providers to collaborate in the areas of training and skills development, digital health and joint research and development. To find out more in this regard, BioSpectrum Asia spoke to Abdul Ekram, Trade Commissioner, Australian Trade and Investment Commission, South Asia, Australia.



What role is the AIBX Programme playing in the healthcare and pharma sector?

AIBX is a response to the 'India Economic Strategy', an ambitious plan to transform Australia's economic partnership with India. Australian Trade, Tourism and Investment Minister Dan Tehan launched the AIBX 2021 programme in Melbourne early this year, alongside Australian and Indian business leaders. This is a four-year strategy to enhance both way business engagements and increase bilateral trade and investment between Australia and India. AIBX is a digital-first programme that will provide actionable market insights and partnership strategies, directly connect companies on both sides to foster commercial engagement through industry roundtables, dialogues and masterclasses. Healthcare is one of the five priority areas in AIBX.

Healthcare initiatives include:

- Launching a digital health report highlighting the Indian digital health value chain and opportunities for Australian digital health companies to engage,
- Innovative health boot camp (in partnership with AstraZeneca) to foster collaborations for the startup to scale-up companies and create a digital value chain integration between India and Australia,
- Partnering with major health and life sciences events in Australia and India to increase market literacy.

In which areas can Australian life sciences companies provide their expertise and explore collaboration in India?

Australian medical technologies are making a global impact. Solutions such as the cochlear implant (bionic ear) and continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) devices for sleep apnea are just two Australian inventions that have transformed the lives of people around the world.

The Australian medical devices and diagnostics industry has pioneered niche products such as 3D customised titanium implants, non-invasive blood glucose monitoring systems, long-wearing night and day contact lenses, melanoma detection devices, transdermal insulin delivery devices, and diagnostic technologies for sleep disorders, neurophysiology and cardiology.

Australia has embraced digital health to provide new ways of delivering services and to radically transform current processes, and increase efficiencies, creating opportunities for collaboration and investment. We have a National Digital Health Strategy, with pioneering initiatives co-produced between consumers, governments, researchers, providers and industry. This includes a framework for secondary data use.

Australia is one of the few developed economies located in the tropics and has extensive research expertise in medicines to tackle diseases like dengue, malaria, and tuberculosis. This creates collaboration opportunities for Indian companies for their home markets. The Australian government actively supports R&D tax incentives and a robust yet flexible regulatory regime that protects intellectual property (IP) and enables research to be undertaken in a timely and efficient manner.

Australia is well known for its capability in training, especially in the healthcare education sector. There are examples of offering joint programmes for infectious diseases, wound care to paramedics training, partnering with leading hospitals and corporates in the market.

How are Australian companies planning to enhance their presence in the life sciences sector in India?

In recent years, Australian research institutions have focused on building relationships with Indian universities and corporates to develop products for the Indian and other international markets. On the business side, besides the strong presence of two known major Australian companies Cochlear and ResMed, we have seen the partnership grow with successes like Australia's Wollongong University partnering with India's first integrated medical tech zone to develop 3D bioprinting. Australia's Griffith University and Indian Immunologicals Ltd (IIL) came together to develop COVID-19 and Zika vaccine research. Under this agreement, the project will be funded by the vaccine manufacturer, IIL, while Griffith University will provide its technical expertise. The George Institute for Global Health, a subsidiary of Go8 UNSW, has been active in India for over a decade. It has built expertise in both Australian and Indian primary healthcare delivery efficiently and affordably through frugal innovation. These translational research outcomes can be rolled out in both countries.

Synapse Medicals has a successful footprint in India with a model of integrated service delivery for Australia and the Indian healthcare sector. With a presence in India for over five years, FBE offers biomedical maintenance services to a large number of hospital equipment in the country. QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute from Brisbane has numerous collaborations with Indian research institutes and organisations, latest with IIT, Bombay using infra-red technology to analyse which patients are most at risk of becoming severely unwell from COVID-19.

How can Australia support India's bio-pharmaceutical sector to conduct clinical trials of global standards?

Australia is regarded as one of the best places in the world to conduct clinical trials. According to a recent report, Australia hosts around 5 per cent of global clinical trials. Considering a country with only around 24 million population, we are certainly 'punching above our weight' in this sector globally. Australian competitive advantage is based on high quality, speed and cost-efficiency. An early-phase trial can start as little as 6-8 weeks after submitting an ethics application.

The Australian government supports stronger engagement with the Indian pharmaceutical industry to strengthen Australian supply chain resilience. India is one of the top 10 sources of medicine imported to Australia. Several leading Indian pharmaceutical companies have a strong marketing presence in Australia. Eligible Indian pharmaceutical companies can benefit by conducting R&D including clinical trials (such as Bio Availability/Bio Equivalence studies) in Australia and avail generous R&D Tax Incentive offered by the Australian government.

Will pharma innovation in India benefit from this association?

Australia provides an end-to-end solution from research and development and clinical trials, through to commercial production with a growing and multi-faceted health and life sciences industry. Australia has a successful history of achieving breakthroughs in biotechnology and ranking among the top 5 in the world for biotech innovation. Australia's track record in discovery and commercialisation includes developing penicillin as medicine for civilian use, discovering the link between *Helicobacter pylori* and gastric ulcers, spray-on skin for burn treatments, influenza treatment (Relenza), and the cervical cancer vaccine.

We see a growing shift in India towards innovative novel drug development, moving up to the pharmaceutical value chain. Some companies like Biocon, Dr. Reddy's, Indian Immunological, Bharat Biotech are actively seeking to collaborate with Australian research institutes to access promising biotech assets and co-development of novel therapeutic products.

We believe there is strong potential for collaborative research between top tier universities, research institutes and industry, especially Indian biopharmaceutical companies. We can certainly create strong synergy through collaboration between Australia and India in the life sciences sector. Australia's strong reputation for incubation and acceleration in the biotechnology sector can be well complemented by India's strong capability and capacity to support commercialisation. We like to position Australia as India's trusted partner in intelligent health solutions and learn from each other to make healthcare accessible, affordable, and efficient to our citizens.

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