BioSpectrum
the business of Bio & Health Sciences
ASIA EDITION

Why talent and collaboration are crucial for biotech startups to sustain R&D

May 3, 2023 | Opinion | By Francis van Parys, Vice President Commercial, Asia Pacific, Cytiva

Emerging biotech startups developing innovative, high-impact therapeutics for patients must be supported



The power of biotech startups has proven to be enormous by BioNTech, during the pandemic, when its mRNA vaccines saved lives around the world. Since then, the biotechnology industry and its investors have been searching eagerly for 'the next BioNTech'"

Many startups had good days between 2019 and 2021 when $35 billion venture capital flooded into the companies. However, we have seen the fever cooling down since 2022. Biotech startups need more flexible solutions to secure their cash flow and talents, which are keys to their surviving and thriving.

Since 2018, Cytiva has provided flexible access to bioprocess development, technology verification, and opportunities to collaborate alongside industry experts and institutional investors to biotech startups' to accelerate and advance their projects from molecule to market. This initiative is called BioChallenge, and it's now expanding its impact across China, Korea, the Southeast Asia region, and Australia and New Zealand. BioChallenge is also exploring and fostering cooperation among governments, industry associates and academia institutions to mitigate the talent, resources and scalability constraints faced by early-stage biotechs.

In South Korea for example, BioChallenge engaged the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare and the Ministry of Food and Drug Safety which then joined as co-sponsors. Two participants of the first season of BioChallenge, GI Innovation and Yuhan Corporation, have since gone on to sign a million USD deal to jointly develop and commercialise a treatment of allergic diseases. Another BioChallenge winner, Genexine, has risen to become the face of K-bio.

In China, BioChallenge goes one step further to bridge startups and investors. In 2022, we attracted over 110 submissions, and thousands of investors. As a result, the winner, GENHOUSE, received $14 million in funding to develop a small molecule anti-tumor drug.

Another flexible offer from Cytiva to meet biotech startups' demands is the talent training and development system, which is taking a high stake in their R&D budget. Compared with the well-established institutions in big biopharma companies, startups

are struggling to compete for mature talents, and to train the fresh hands.

Cytiva has established the Fast Trak Education and Training Programme, available at six centres globally – three of which are based in Asia Pacific region -- Korea, China, and India. For example, both Songdo and Shanghai centres have the capability to train more than 300 people every year for the biotechnology industry. The India centre collaborates with Bangalore BioInnovation Centre to set up a world class incubation centre to provide bioprocessing training programmes to support the startup ecosystem in India.

To nurture talent in ASEAN, Cytiva established the Experience Learning Lab (CELL) in Singapore in 2021. CELL, a learning facility that provides education and training on the latest bioprocessing and production techniques to develop advanced therapeutics, has delivered over 70 training sessions to tertiary academic and research institutes.

I firmly believe that we must continue the kind of collaboration in the R&D ecosystem that has brought us safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines. With the reset of the biotech industry after the pandemic, emerging biotech startups developing innovative, high-impact therapeutics for patients must also be supported. And this should be the joint responsibility of industry, governments, think tanks and academia institutions.

Besides money, biotech startups need talent and collaboration to sustain their R&D investment, in an accessible, affordable, and flexible way.

Francis van Parys, Vice President Commercial, Asia Pacific, Cytiva