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Singaporeâ??s next life sciences advantage will be built between the lab and market

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Research funding and world-class institutions matter, but the real competitive edge lies in connecting universities, healthcare systems, industry and communities, then turning discovery into jobs, businesses and better health outcomes

Singapore has spent decades building the foundations of a global biomedical hub. The more difficult task now is not to simply fund more science or attract more multinational investments, but to make the connections between research, healthcare, enterprise and talent work faster — ensuring that the value created spreads beyond laboratories and corporate campuses.

That challenge is becoming central to international competitiveness. Cities and countries are increasingly judged not only by the quality of their universities or hospitals, but by whether those institutions attract expertise, produce intellectual property, create companies and build skilled workforces.

At the recent 56th Annual World Trade Centers Association (WTCA) Global Business Forum (GBF), hosted by World Trade Center (WTC) Greater Philadelphia, a discussion on “Eds and Meds” (the universities, research institutions and healthcare organisations that anchor knowledge economies) and how they drive international growth offered a useful lens for Singapore. Speakers from the United States and Canada argued that these institutions should be understood not as self-contained sectors, but as platforms for wider economic growth.

From institutional strength to ecosystem value

Dr Rebecca Grant, senior director, life sciences and innovation at the Philadelphia Department of Commerce, described education and healthcare institutions as foundational economic assets whose influence extends well beyond their traditional missions.

“Eds and meds isn’t just a sector. It’s the backbone of the economy,” she said.

Universities, hospitals and research centres are major employers. They also draw in international talent, research capital and specialist suppliers; and create demand across advanced manufacturing, digital infrastructure and professional services.

Grant’s Philadelphia perspective is particularly relevant to Singapore because it places the emphasis on the connective tissue of an ecosystem.

Scientific excellence is indispensable, but it does not automatically become economic value. Translation depends on researchers, clinicians, entrepreneurs, investors, manufacturers, regulators and public agencies being able to move ideas across institutional boundaries.

Singapore already has considerable weight behind this model. Under the Research, Innovation and Enterprise 2030 plan, the Singapore government has committed $37 billion (about 1 per cent of gross domestic product) over five years from April 2026. Singapore also has more than 60 biopharmaceutical manufacturing plants, while eight of the world’s 10 largest biopharmaceutical companies manufacture here.

While these numbers demonstrate scale, they also raise the next-order question — how can Singapore extract more value from the proximity of its universities, A*STAR research institutes, healthcare clusters, start-ups, investors and global companies? In a compact city-state, the more significant barriers are institutional — varying motivations, timelines and risk appetites.

Manitoba showcases model for life sciences-led growth

Offering an international perspective, Andrea Ladouceur, president and CEO of the Bioscience Association Manitoba, shared how the Canadian province of Manitoba has leveraged its life sciences sector as a significant economic driver.

Ladouceur said medicine manufacturing accounts for nearly 7 per cent of Manitoba's gross domestic product, with related activities contributing an additional 11 to 16 per cent. The province also produces nearly 30 per cent of Canada's exported medicines despite its relatively small population.

She attributed Manitoba's success to close collaboration among three key stakeholders — industry, government and academia.

“Research does not end until it reaches the patient,” Ladouceur said, underscoring the importance of aligning scientific discovery, commercialisation and public policy to generate both economic and social value.

The province is currently focusing on three strategic priorities — strengthening medicine supply-chain security, accelerating access to high-impact treatments and retaining more of the economic value generated by locally developed research.

Ladouceur noted that jurisdictions seeking to strengthen their competitiveness in life sciences are increasingly examining regulatory frameworks, intellectual property policies, clinical trial ecosystems and commercialisation pathways to attract investment and retain innovation.

She also pointed to shifting global supply chains as an emerging opportunity for regions that can offer reliable logistics infrastructure and supportive business environments.

Growth has to reach people and businesses

Grant furthermore cautioned that a successful knowledge economy cannot be judged solely by investment totals or high-value jobs. The benefits must reach local workers, small businesses and communities.

In Philadelphia, she adds, this means stronger talent pipelines, closer partnerships between educational institutions and public schools, and deliberate efforts to connect residents and suppliers to opportunities created by large academic and healthcare organisations.

These principles matter in Singapore as well. Life sciences growth will be more durable if it creates entry points not only for doctorate-level researchers, but also for technicians, manufacturing specialists, data professionals and mid-career workers. Educators, healthcare groups and employers must build pathways that allow people to enter, reskill and progress.

The same applies to local enterprises. Global investment produces deeper economic roots when Singapore-based suppliers can meet the sector’s demanding standards, participate in innovation programmes and expand alongside multinational

companies. Ecosystem policy should therefore treat workforce development and supplier capability not as supporting measures, but as core infrastructure.

Grant's broader point was that diversity and global talent have been central to Philadelphia's success as a life sciences hub. Singapore faces a similar imperative — remaining open to specialised international expertise while developing local talent and public confidence in that openness.

With its global trade ecosystem covering more than 300 major cities in nearly 100 countries and territories, WTCA is uniquely positioned to empower the MedTech industry to access buyers, distributors and strategic partners in Free Trade Agreement partner markets such as the UK and EU. The local WTC teams in these markets can also provide critical services in business connections, market intelligence and communication assistance through various programmes such as business matchmaking, trade missions, market research, corporate training, trade shows, as well as events and conferences.

The competitive unit is now the ecosystem

No university, hospital, company or government agency can produce transformative outcomes alone. The places that lead will make collaboration routine, reduce friction between discovery and deployment, and align commercial ambition with public purpose.

Singapore has already assembled many of the necessary institutions and committed substantial capital. Its next competitive advantage will come from how those assets behave as a system — whether knowledge travels, talent circulates, companies grow and communities share in the returns. That is the real lesson of the "Eds and Meds" model.

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