



SOUTHINDIAPICTURE/ALAMY

to write home about. “We have not been able to develop any drugs ourselves,” he says, noting just one exception — guggulipid, a compound extracted from the myrrh tree, and approved domestically as an anticholesterol drug. “So why not give Western companies a chance?”

That sanguine outlook is rejected by Suman Sahai of Gene Campaign, a pressure group based in New Delhi that strongly opposes the opening of the database to commercial firms. Foreign companies won't need local partners, she says: “they can follow the leads on their own”. And Nitya Anand, a former director of the Central Drug Research Institute in Lucknow, warns that even if the major firms collaborate with local researchers, India may not be able to guide them to pursue agendas relevant to pressing local healthcare needs.

Other critics say that Western companies won't be able to do much with the traditional remedies because they are obsessed with single chemical entities. “The single-molecule model does not apply to our medicines, which work because of the synergistic effect of several molecules,” says G. Satyavati, former chief of the Indian Council of Medical Research.

But many researchers in India take a brighter view. “Using traditional knowledge to discover medications is an idea whose time has come,” says Vis Niranjan, president of RxMD Private, a management consultancy based in Chennai. “Cures for many illnesses are found in nature. The information contained in the library is phenomenal — and it is time someone mined the data to identify cures.” ■

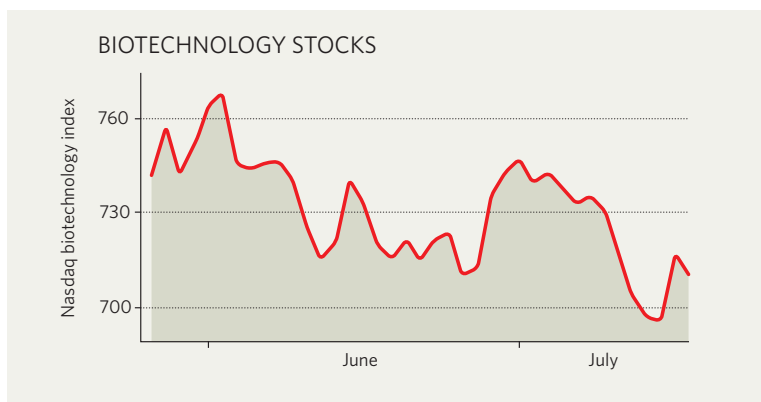
IN BRIEF

VACCINE VENTURE Swiss drugmaker Novartis has announced plans to build a \$600-million, state-of-the-art production plant for flu vaccine in Holly Springs, North Carolina. The plant — more than a third of which will be paid for by the US government — will be the first in the United States to derive vaccines from cell culture rather than the chicken eggs commonly used at present. The company says its facility is designed to produce 50 million doses of seasonal flu vaccine annually, and up to 150 million doses of avian-flu vaccine if required.

CHINA CRISIS Amnesty International, the human-rights watchdog, has accused Google, Yahoo and Microsoft of contributing to ‘Internet repression’ in China by cooperating with the country's authorities. “The apparatus of Internet repression is considered to be more advanced in China than in any other country and companies are particularly willing to cooperate with the Chinese government,” Amnesty says in a report issued on 20 July. Yahoo has faced a consumer backlash in the West, after giving the police the identities of two dissident Chinese writers, who are now in prison.

GREEN FOCUS The Ford motor company has said that it will spend £1 billion (US\$1.9 billion) over six years in Britain on research and development into cleaner engines. The company says that 9,500 engineers will be deployed in the effort. It intends to create a version of its most popular car — the Ford Focus — that delivers 70 miles per gallon. The announcement has been welcomed by the government, but unions note that it involves the redeployment of existing resources, not fresh investment.

MARKET WATCH



This week, Wood Mackenzie, an Edinburgh-based research and consulting firm, reviews recent trends in biotechnology stocks.

Biotech continues to retreat from its high point in February, although the rate of decline has slowed: the Nasdaq biotechnology index is down 4% over the past eight weeks, and 12% since the start of the year. Broader indices are also falling in a volatile market.

Amgen of Thousand Oaks, California, has fared particularly badly, falling 5% over the past eight weeks and 20% so far in 2006. Investors believe there is a growing threat to Amgen's erythropoietin drugs for treating anaemia, which generated \$5.8 billion in sales in 2005 — nearly half of total turnover. Rival Roche of Basel, Switzerland, has a second-generation erythropoietin drug, called CERA, which is likely to reach the market in 2007. And the European Union has cleared

a path for the approval of generic versions of some biological drugs, including erythropoietin.

Amgen is given more ‘weight’ in the index than any other company, so its losses are an important factor in the overall drop. But many other listed firms have suffered.

Shares in Anadys Pharmaceuticals of San Diego, California, lost two-thirds of their value after the company suspended a phase I trial of its hepatitis-C treatment and its chief executive announced his forthcoming departure. Stock prices in another San Diego company, Neurocrine Biosciences, dropped by three-quarters after problems with its insomnia drug candidate, indiplon.

In a period of general market anxiety, biotech shares are particularly vulnerable to bad news. Now, strong second-quarter results will be needed to bolster confidence in the sector. ■