



Researchers at the New Delhi laboratory of the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology will soon move into their US\$3.3 million facility.

Funding for international centre begins to pay dividends

Investments by Italy and India in the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology in New Delhi are beginning to pay off, as some 80 scientists are getting ready to move into their new home — a US\$3.3 million complex built with the support of the Indian government.

The first product to roll off the laboratory's production line — an inexpensive test kit for the human immunodeficiency virus — should be on the market within two months and will be purchased by the World Health Organization. And, before the year's out, the laboratory expects to add to this three genetically engineered products — gamma interferon, human insulin and a vaccine against the hepatitis B virus.

"We will make some money from these," says its director, Krishna Kumar Tewari, but, more importantly, "we will have shown the world what this centre is capable of doing."

The centre's two laboratory complexes (the other is in Trieste, Italy) were set up in the late 1980s by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) to strengthen the biotechnology research capacity of developing nations by, for example, providing training opportunities for scientists from any of the centre's 32 member countries. In the six-and-a-half years since it was set up, the New Delhi laboratory has hosted four international conferences and 18 workshops and has provided long-term training to some ten researchers. Despite this, none of the member countries has so far pledged support for the New Delhi laboratory, whose entire budget comes from Italy (\$2.1 million) and India

(\$1 million). Tewari says that during 1995–1996, an additional \$1 million will be needed to set up an animal house, library, greenhouse and computer centre in the new building.

UNIDO's control over the centre ended last year when it was granted independent status. However, under the UN Treaty signed by member countries, their contributions to the centre are legally required only after 1999.

Tewari expects that the centre's newfound independence will make it easier for it to get grants from other international organizations, and to attract interest from companies in the centre's activities. (For example, formerly, it took the Workhart Company two years to be granted a licence to develop hepatitis B vaccine technology.)

A potential money spinner under development in Tewari's laboratory is a vaccine against hepatitis E virus, technology that he hopes to be able to offer to the highest bidder. The fact that 50 per cent of liver infections in India are caused by the hepatitis E virus was unknown until scientists at the New Delhi laboratory isolated the virus and sequenced its genome. Tewari believes that it will become more important for travellers to this part of the world to be protected against hepatitis E rather than hepatitis B virus. Commercially speaking, all this could be good news for the New Delhi laboratory (and the centre), which now has a diagnostic test for organization E under development and all the right ingredients for making a vaccine.

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Boost for UK biomedical research

A new approach to funding has resulted in medical research and biotechnology receiving a larger share of Britain's science budget for the 1995–1996 fiscal year. For the first time, £67 million (US\$106 million) out of a total budget of £1.3 billion (\$2.1 billion) will be earmarked for so-called priority initiatives before the money goes to the government's six research councils. The earmarking of funds is the first outcome of the government's Technology Foresight programme, to increase interaction with industry in fields of strategic economic importance to Britain.

The government hopes to build on the strengths of Britain's biomedical research and its home-grown pharmaceutical industry. Most of the areas singled out for special support are in the biological sciences and include human genetics, immunology and vaccine research, and bioprocessing. Of the earmarked funds, more than one-third (£24 million) will go to the Medical Research Council and the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council.

The minister for science, David Hunt, wrote that the earmarking would "encourage academic researchers to connect with industry and commerce." Overall, the Medical Research Council will get £228 million, up £8.5 million on last year, and the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Council will see its annual budget rise to £162 million, an increase of £4.5 million.

These increases should go some way to allay the fears of some researchers that the government would use the high level of funding now being provided by the Wellcome Trust, Britain's largest biomedical research charity, as an excuse to cut the Medical Research Council's budget. (The Trust presently funds about £200 million annually in research.)

Indeed, medical research in Britain will get a further boost with the £9.4 billion (US\$15 billion) sale of the pharmaceutical company Wellcome to Glaxo, creating the world's biggest drug company. The Trust, which is the largest shareholder in Wellcome with a 40 per cent stake, expects to increase spending on medical research by £50 million a year as a result.

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