



Straight talk with... BT Slingsby

Japan boasts the second-largest pharmaceutical industry in the world. With its rich background in medical research, the country has turned its attention to diseases of the developing world with this year's launch of the Global Health Innovative Technology (GHIT) Fund—a new public-private partnership between five Japanese pharmaceutical companies, two government ministries and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In November, the Tokyo-based fund announced its first round of awards totaling \$5.7 million. The six grants will go to partnerships aimed at developing new drugs and vaccines to fight malaria, tuberculosis and Chagas disease, a neglected disease endemic to Latin America.

Leading the new \$120 million, five-year initiative is BT Slingsby, a US-born scholar of the Japanese healthcare industry who most recently served as director of global partner solutions at Eisai, a Tokyo-based drugmaker. On a recent trip to New York, Slingsby, who serves as GHIT's executive director and CEO, met with **Cassandra Willyard** to discuss the new fund and how Japan can help drive development of medicines and vaccines for diseases of the developing world.

How did the GHIT Fund originate?

The GHIT Fund was conceived in the pharmaceutical industry in Japan initially between two companies, Eisai and Takeda. At that time I was at Eisai. Dr. Tachi Yamada, previously of the Gates Foundation, had joined Takeda [as chief medical and scientific officer]. The idea was to create a public-private partnership fund that would allow more innovations in technologies to come out of Japan for global health. We're out there to identify and to facilitate and advance new product development to bring more Japanese formulation expertise, more Japanese chemistry, more Japanese expertise to the table for global health R&D. Japan is a powerhouse in terms of drug development and innovation and also a leader in terms of overseas aid. It was good to be able to tap into that.

When did the idea come about?

The fall of 2011. By early 2012, we had a launch committee set in

place between the five companies [Astellas Pharma, Daiichi Sankyo, Shionogi, Eisai and Takeda] and the two ministries and the Gates Foundation. And then over the course of a year, we devised the governance and the access policies and the organization itself. In April of 2013, it was launched. The government is providing 50% [of the \$120 million], and then the Gates Foundation along with the private sector is providing the other 50%.

A number of public-private partnerships aimed at global health already exist. What does GHIT add to the existing landscape?

Typically the capital is coming from the public sector—from governments, also from foundations such as the Wellcome Trust and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This is the first time that a group of pharmaceutical companies took the initiative to begin this fund and to actually invest cash into it. Those pharmaceutical companies in the private sector are on a council, which is different than our board. So they're not involved in the decision making of the organization. And the funds that come out of our entity need not necessarily go to those same private companies. They can go to any institution in Japan. In fact, all of our grants and funding go to partnerships between Japanese entities and non-Japanese entities.

Why Japan?

Japan actually has a rich history in eliminating neglected tropical diseases and malaria. In recent decades, Japan has been a prominent leader in overseas development aid. Most of that aid has gone more to delivery and to infrastructure. This is now a vehicle to provide more of that aid towards global health R&D and towards innovation. Most importantly, if you look at the pharmaceutical sector of Japan, you're looking at a sector that has been an innovator of new chemical entities for drugs. The essence behind a medicine or a drug is that chemical entity.

How will you ensure that the products you help develop reach the people who need them most?

We're ensuring that [the products] be provided at an affordable price. For many of these products, that's going to mean essentially [selling] at cost for the endemic populations. In terms of licenses, it's going to be royalty-free licenses to the endemic countries.

In November you awarded several new grants. Can you give an example of the kind of research you're funding?

We have two partnerships between Takeda and Medicines for Malaria Ventures, which is a nonprofit organization set up in Geneva to advance drug discovery and development for malaria. These two partnerships are looking at trying to push forward the development of two novel drugs for malaria. One of the projects will likely be going into a phase 1 [clinical trial]. We also have a separate set of investments for drug discovery at the screening level. You screen compound libraries and then you try to find hits of new chemical entities and compounds that can have an actual effect on these diseases.

Where will these libraries come from?

You have four of the libraries coming from the private sector [Eisai, Daiichi Sankyo, Shionogi and Takeda] and two of the libraries coming from public or academic sector [the Institute of Microbial Chemistry and the Kitasato Institute, both based in Tokyo]. It's [previously] been difficult to get access to these libraries. So that is precisely the value added. It's almost more valuable than the actual cash.