

# We need an ecosystem of innovation to retain our young scientists: Novartis India chief

## MNCs overseas hire 15% of their research hands from India

BY FROMI DUTTA

Last September, Novartis India chief Ranjit Shahani stepped down as President of the Organisation of Pharmaceutical Producers of India, a global forum for drug-makers.

In April 2013, the Supreme Court delivered its judgment on a benchmark case involving Glivec, a blood cancer drug from Novartis.

The two incidents may not be linked. But there is no denying the pressure on Shahani, especially in the years leading up to the Glivec judgment that set the tone for implementing the amended Patents Act in India.

"I don't know if Glivec was the poster boy or I was," says Shahani, recollecting the global scrutiny. After seven years of litigation, the SC eventually dismissed No-

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vartis' application for a patent on Glivec. "It was disappointing...I was involved every step of the way," says Shahani. Glivec was a breakthrough drug and it changed the way cancer is treated and researched, he reiterates.

But that experience has not deterred Shahani from appealing to the Government to create an ecosystem of innovation. By not doing so, he says, the country is losing its share of young scientists who seek opportunities abroad.

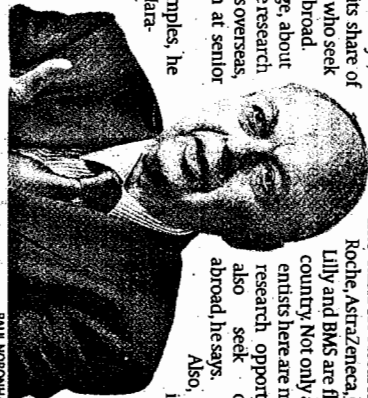
On an average, about 15 per cent of the research strength of MNCs overseas, is from India even at senior levels, he says.

Citing in-house examples, he mentions Vasant Vag's Narasimhan, global head of development at Novartis Pharmaceuticals; Dhaval Kumar D Patel heading Novartis Initiatives for Biomed-

ical Research (NIBR) Europe. In 1993, Jawahar Lal Nehru had inaugurated the Ciba-Geigy research centre in Mumbai. It shut in 1982, Shahani says, waiting for patent protection laws. More recently, AstraZeneca closed its centre in Bangalore.

**Missed opportunity**  
Meanwhile, billions of dollars are flowing into China for research, as Novartis, Roche, AstraZeneca, GSK, Pfizer, Eli Lilly and BMS are flooding to the country. Not only are young scientists here are missing global research opportunities, they also seek opportunities abroad, he says.

Also, investments into China, in mean India's loss, as global companies do not usually set up more than



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**Investments into China, means that India has lost an opportunity, as companies do not set up more than one R&D centre in a region.**

RANJIT SHAHANI

one R&D centre in a region, he explains. Shahani reflects on whether the pharmaceutical industry needs to introspect - as its image takes a hard knock from battles over drug prices and patents across the world.

**Changing goal-posts**

Local governments are anxious over a recent Government diktat on price control on a few diabetic drugs. The directive, intended to help patients, left the industry grappling with changing goal-posts. That makes it difficult for companies to plan for growth in the region, says Shahani.

Though India has the talent and demographic advantage, "we lose out on our inability to defend recent measures taken by the regulatory authorities - be it price

control, intellectual property or clinical trials," says Shahani. "I fight two battles," he says. On the one hand, with the "man-darins in Delhi" on liberalising policies and increasing investment in healthcare and on the other, with Novartis urging them to invest in India despite the current climate. "We have to ensure that competitively, we lay the red carpet not the red tape," he says.

**Creative solutions**

As for medicine prices, there is pressure globally, Shahani agrees. However, India is many markets, and stakeholders at multiple levels need to address this through creative solutions, he adds.

"There is no one-size-fits-all solution," and it is harder when there are millions who can't afford healthcare at. These challenges and society together put the pharma industry under scrutiny. It does need to connect and communicate with people to address its public image, Shahani says. Over the years, advocacy does not seem to have worked too well, he adds, reflectively.

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