Congratulations to ASIA PACIFIC BIOTECH NEWS (APBN) on its 10th anniversary! Over the past 10 years, APBN has witnessed the booming growth and development of basic and translational research in Asia Pacific. The advance in science and technology has been proven critical for improving human lives. Being one of the most populated region in the world, countries in the Asia Pacific will have to strive for excellence in biotechnology to maintain sustainable economic growth and to improve living environments. As a scientist and a current member of the editorial board, I earnestly wish APBN all the success in serving not only as a window for scientific communities, but also as a bridge between scientific and non-scientific communities.

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University of Queensland Offers Biotech Scholarship to Indian Students

The University of Queensland (UQ), IDP Education Australia and the Queensland Government have joined forces to launch a new biotechnology scholarship for Indian students. The biotechnology scholarship is part of a series of IDP Peace Scholarships, which originated at the Australian International Education Conference in 2001. According to UQ's international and development deputy vice-chancellor Professor Trevor Grigg, it will reward new talent from India. This will lead to greater investment in the university’s growing biotechnology partnership with India. The scholarship was launched at the Australia-India Biotechnology Conference in Hyderabad.

Australian Government Contributes $50M to Walter and Eliza Hall Institute

Australia’s Prime Minister John Howard recently announced a A$50 million (US$37 million) contribution from the Commonwealth Government towards the construction of a seven-storeys extension of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute in Melbourne. The extension will double the size of the institute. The institute is celebrating its 90th anniversary this year. It is Australia’s largest medical research institute with an annual income of A$60 million (US$44 million). It is internationally acknowledged for its research in cancer, autoimmune, tropical diseases and multiple sclerosis. The Commonwealth contribution matches a A$50 million (US$37 million) pledge from the Victorian State Government announced in November 2005.

US Pharmacy Giant MedicineShoppe Opens its First Store in China’s ChongQing

US pharmacy chain MedicineShoppe has opened its first drug store in southwest China’s ChongQing municipality. MedicineShoppe provides a professional medicine information service. Physicians will be available around the clock for client services and they will keep records of clients’ disease history by using the computer. MedicineShoppe plans to launch another five stores in the central areas of Chongqing this year, and the store number will extend to 50 in the coming two years. Established in 1970, MedicineShoppe is the No. 1 brand on medicine retail, with an annual sales volume of US$2 billion and more than 1500 stores around the world.
Pall Life Science Sets up Proteomics Center at Bangalore

Pall Life Sciences is setting up a process proteomics center at Bangalore with an investment of over US$1 million. The facility will be situated at J P Nagar in Bangalore, India. The center will have very advanced facilities with five exclusive laboratories for validation, training, industrial, chemistry, proteomics etc. Pall Corporation has been active in India for more than two decades. Two years ago, the Pall Pharmalab Filtration, a joint venture of Pharmalab Filtration Engineering Group and Pall Corporation, was converted to Pall India as a 100 per cent subsidiary of the Pall Corporation by buying the remaining stake in the joint venture. At present, Pall is among the top three players in India in the market for filtration, separation and purification equipments. The company hopes to achieve a market share of more than 50 percent of the domestic market within the next five years.

Taiwan’s Vita Genomics, Yang Ming University and India’s IGIB Sign Agreement on Liver Disease Research

A research alliance is forged between Taipei-based Vita Genomics, Taiwan’s Yang Ming University and Delhi-based Institute of Genomics & Integrative Biology (IGIB). These three organizations will collaborate on liver disease research. The alliance partners will conduct research at their respective home laboratories, working as a virtual research team.

Vita Genomics is one of the leading bioinformatics companies in Taiwan. It is headed by Dr Ellson Chen, who was previously a principal scientist at Celera Corp. Celera is famous for winning the race to decode the human genome at the turn of the millennium. Vita is currently focused on research in hepatitis B and C disease treatment via sequencing, genotyping, and RNA expression analysis.

Yang Ming University’s Genome Research Center, headed by Dr Yang Ueng-cheng, is well known in Taiwan for its participant in the international Human Genome Project. More recently, the center was primarily responsible for Taiwan’s participation in the decoding of the rice genome, which is also an international effort.

The Institute of Genomics & Integrative Biology is a part of the Indian government-funded institute, the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). It is home to 47 scientists focused on genomics and bioinformatics research.

Hong Kong and Guangdong Health Experts to Collaborate on Bird Flu Lab Testing

Hong Kong and mainland’s Guangdong province health experts have probed ways for a collaboration in laboratory testing to further strengthen ties against avian flu. According to a government press release, the strengthening of ties in laboratory testing was discussed during a meeting of health officials from Guangdong province and Hong Kong. They have also discussed the investigation progress of the fatal human avian flu case in Guangzhou recently. The Guangdong Center for Disease Control & Prevention said there are no suspected human avian influenza infections in the province at the moment. Studies are being conducted to learn how the patients acquired the infection, and the markets are also being checked. Checks for severe pneumonia cases since January are being conducted to identify undiagnosed human avian influenza cases. Over 120 contacts of the deceased have been put under medical surveillance and the surveillance of severe pneumonia cases of unknown causes has also been enhanced in the province.
US Imalux Corporation Inks Distribution Deals with Beijing Goodwell Company Limited

Imalux Corporation, a US-based medical imaging company announced the signing of a distribution agreement with a major Chinese medical devices distribution company, Beijing Goodwell Company Limited. Beijing Goodwell will promote, sell, and service the company's innovative imaging systems in mainland China.

With its Niris Imaging System, Imalux is the first company to commercialize the Optical Coherence Tomography (OCT) technology. This technology was first developed in Russia in 1991. The technology uses harmless, near-infrared light to create real-time images of a variety of tissue types. According to the company, the spatial resolution of OCT technology is in the order of 0.01 mm, far surpassing conventional ultrasound imaging. It can be used by physicians in the diagnosis, treatment, and monitoring of patients. It can be used in fields such as urology, gastroenterology, gynecology, dermatology and dentistry. Imalux will spend several months training Beijing Goodwell staff on the Niris system image interpretation, as well as sales and service training.

Beijing Goodwell is a distributor for big name medical devices companies such as GE and Respironics. Based in Beijing, it was formed in 1994. It has 110 employees. The company boasts a large sales and service network covering the mainland. Imalux was formed in 1996 in Cleveland, Ohio. It began commercializing OCT imaging technology in 2000. Its imaging systems are currently under evaluation in medical institutions worldwide.

Australia’s CSL Expansion Facility and Vaccine Market

Australia’s leading biopharmaceutical company, CSL Limited has announced an investment of A$80 million (US$59 million) towards the expansion of their Melbourne facility. The expansion is expected to double the dosage capacity of their influenza vaccine, making it one of the largest vaccine manufacturing plants in the world. CSL anticipates human clinical trials of their influenza vaccine in the US later this year followed by the application for US market licensing.

Update on Bird flu

Two more samples from dead swans were tested positive for the H5N1 strain of bird flu in Greece recently. This brings the number of infected wild fowl in Greece to 32. Both birds were found in northern Greece. The H5N1 virus has also been found in Poland recently. The deadly virus was found in the town of Kostrzyn on Odra, Krzysztof Jazdzewski, Poland’s westernmost port of Swinoujscie and Bydgoszcz. The virus was also found in Cameroon, making the country the fourth African country to report an outbreak of H5N1 bird flu. Nigeria, Egypt and Niger are the other three African countries that reported on the deadly virus. In Asia, authorities in Myanmar tested scores of dead birds for the virus.

Singapore Scientists Make Discoveries on Stomach Cancer

Singapore researchers led by Dr Patrick Tan, principal investigator at National Cancer Center, Singapore, has been working with major centers in the region on stomach cancer. They have been trying to come up with a molecular map of stomach cancer so as to find better treatments for the disease. Stomach cancer is prevalent in Asia but it is little studied on other countries. The research team comprises an international team from University of Hong Kong, the University of Tokyo and Australia’s Peter Mac Cullum Cancer Center. The researchers have uncovered key molecular changes which cause the cells in the stomach to divide uncontrollably and change to a cancerous cell. The team has also been able to learn more about why certain patients survive longer due to a particular form of gene inactivity.
India and the US Collaborate on Agriculture

President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reaffirmed their commitment to expand even further the growing ties between their two countries in a joint statement issued during President Bush’s visit to India recently. The two leaders highlighted the launching of the United States–India Agricultural Knowledge Initiative with a three-year financial commitment to link the two countries’ universities, technical institutions, and businesses to support agriculture education, joint research, and capacity building projects including in the area of biotechnology. Both countries also sought to expand cooperation by endorsing an agreed workplan to promote bilateral trade in agriculture through agreements. These agreements have the following objectives: lay out a path to open the US market to Indian mangoes; recognize India as having the authority to certify that shipments of Indian products to the United States meet USDA organic standards; and provide for discussions on current regulations affecting trade in fresh fruits and vegetables, poultry and dairy, and almonds.

Cygenics Awarded Another Patent

US-based Cytomatrix LLC, a subsidiary of leading cell therapy services company, CyGenics Ltd, had been granted US Patent 6991933, cell culture spinner flasks. This patent adds to the five already granted to the CyGenics group. A number of other patents are pending. This patent is for the company’s unique starwheel cell culture spinner flasks. These flasks provide an enhanced system for cell growth and improved secreted product yield by improving materials transfer via passive perfusion. The system can produce high concentrations of cells that can be used as targets for extraneous agent interaction such as viruses or stimulating compounds. Cells or modified cells grown in the system can be used to produce higher levels of secreted products while minimizing downstream processing. The flasks are currently being used for research purposes and they are under license for small scale manufacture of specialized products. The flasks are currently sold through the products arm of CyGenics, Cell Sciences and through a distributor in the US, BioMedical Resources, Northboro MA.

Korea’s Professor Hwang’s Fabrication of Embryonic Stem Cell Research

Scandal erupted around the doctor last year, when Korea’s stem cell researcher, Professor Hwang Woo Suk, was forced to step down as the chairman of South Korea’s World Stem Cell Hub, after admitting that eggs for his research were donated by his own female colleagues, in breach of guideline. The South Korean stem cell researcher apologized for lying about the sources of some human eggs used in his research. Professor Hwang Woo Suk also published a paper in the journal Science that claimed his team had successfully obtained stem cells from cloned human embryos. But allegations from co-workers that he had falsified data followed and he later resigned from Seoul National University. A university panel investigated his results and announced that he had fabricated data. Although Professor Hwang admitted to the forged results, he maintained that he still has the technology to do what he claimed. Recently, the South Korea’s Health Ministry has revoked permission for Professor Hwang to conduct any embryonic stem cell research.