Big pharma finds new magic bullet in S’pore

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By LYNN KAN

As its 12-year-old biomedical and pharmaceutical scene matures, Singapore is beginning to change the way in which it adds value to some of the largest companies it has wooed here.

Bayer HealthCare said it is consolidating six separate cancer-related research tie-ups with Singapore researchers and clinicians under a single Integrated Translational Oncology Network geared towards addressing the growing cancer burden in Asia.

Bayer’s network, which was facilitated by the Singapore Economic Development Board (EDB), will hopefully accelerate the typical 15-year, US$1 billion process taken to translate research done at the bench to the patient’s bedside.

It counts the Cancer Science Institute of Singapore at the National University of Singapore, the National Cancer Centre Singapore, Singapore General Hospital, A*Star’s Singapore Bioimaging Consortium and the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School Singapore, as some of its partners.

“In general, how industry works together with academic institutions is usually very individualised,” said Andreas Busch, head of global drug discovery at Bayer HealthCare. “Now we have the chance to integrate many individuals into one project, a huge benefit to us.”

The more efficient and transparent way of working comes at a crucial time. In November 2012, Bayer began clinical testing in Singapore of a new compound to treat stomach cancer, one of Asia’s most prevalent cancers.

“Looking at a complex medical problem like treating cancer from different angles will certainly enhance our ability to find solutions and to move these compounds forward much quicker,” said Karl Ziegelsbauer, senior vice president, oncology and gynaecology research, Bayer HealthCare.

Moreover, Singapore’s diversity of Asian genetic make-up will aid the development of more suitable therapeutics closer to market, he added.

EDB’s director of biomedical sciences Kevin Lai said that as pharma companies make changes to their investment strategy, Singapore is likewise changing tack.

“If you track the history of our investment promotion effort to attract R&D investments into Singapore, we started off getting companies to set up their corporate labs – like GlaxoSmithKline and Novartis – here,” said Mr Lai.

“Over the last few years, we’ve realised companies are changing their investment strategies. They realise they cannot do everything in-house, and build the brick-and-mortar (infrastructure) on their own... and are beginning to be a lot more aggressive in forming partnerships with different people.”

“Our strategy would have to follow suit, so we have to look at different opportunities to get pharma companies to work with research institutes here in Singapore,” he said.

Mr Lai adds that corporate partnerships like Bayer’s will flourish beyond oncology, in areas such as ophthalmology and cardiology, where Singapore has built up an expertise.

“Formal networks like Bayer’s are something we will continue to see as a trend. Previously many of these started to form between public sector institutes and academia. Now, the industry interface is much stronger,” he said.

From the other side of the equation, Singapore’s scientists and clinicians also become better-versed and comfortable with industry tie-ups, said Kishore Bhakoo who is part of the Singapore Bioimaging Consortia partnering Bayer.

Since late-2010, Singapore began emphasising economic outcomes from scientific research and coaxed closer industry partnerships with the launch of a S$600 million Industry Alignment Fund.