

People assets—Are we on track?

*A roadblock to the Indian pharma success story could be diminishing human resources, opines **Dr Gopakumar G Nair**, Patent Attorney and the CEO of Gopakumar Nair Associates.*

Indisputably, we are in the knowledge era. Knowledge and information-based growth is the 'mantra' of the 21st century. India claims to be the second or third largest owner of Technically Qualified Manpower (TQM). Does this pool of TQM meet the growing need of the pharma industry? Ask any HR professional in the pharma industry, the unanimous answer will be no. In fact, for every 100 scientists or PhDs that a new R&D centre needs, you can hardly find 10 and even these are "poached" from competitors.

People are the key assets for success in the new knowledge era. Knowledge and intellect don't grow on trees. Nor can you buy them on super markets. Peter Drucker had defined (as early as 1959) a "knowledge worker" as one who works primarily with the right information or who develops and uses knowledge in his workplace. Sustainable development of technical manpower is essential for maintaining the R&D thrust and pharma leadership that India is seeking. Even though one sees comments from the national leadership on motivating students to take up more basic science subjects to advance levels, it is indeed depressing to see diminishing interest among top ranking students to pursue higher studies in basic sciences.

The cost factor is also shocking. In the sixties and seventies, one could easily achieve PhD in a science subject with a scholarship. Recently, while researching on the subject, it was very disheartening to note that most private institutions are asking for substantial upfront payment for accepting PhD students. Somewhere, something is wrong. It is time that we take the responsibility collectively and correct the imbalance.

India now ranks 12th in patent filings globally. Patent filings by Indians have gone up 365 percent between 1995 and 2004 (post-WTO and TRIPs). However, India still ranks very low in patent filings compared to other Asian countries like Korea and Japan. India has great potential for drug discovery and clinical research both for Indian companies as well as on contract basis. However, the main bottlenecks in the years to come are adequate technically qualified research workers with excellence and passion. Unless effective steps are initiated now, this gap is expected to widen.

Let us take the example of the Indian Patent Office. In 2004, more than 20,000 patent applications were received by Indian patent offices. This figure is expected to double every year in the coming years. Even though, India has taken adequate steps to create physical infrastructure in the four metro-cities by setting up "Intellectual Property Offices", it is dismally and inadequately equipped with people resources to meet the growing needs of the future. Even though, at one time, some enthusiastic recruitment initiatives for patent examiners were undertaken, this has not been followed up by providing attractive or even reasonable financial packages to retain the talents, which were trained in-house. Consequently, most of these examiners have deserted for greener

pastures. This has led to piling up of unexamined patent applications, inordinate delays in office actions and misery all around, among all concerned.

India has done well in IT education. However, it may be true to say that pharma, chemistry, biotech and other basic sciences have suffered in this "BPO" transition. The question now is who will bell the cat? The government especially the HRD Ministry is evidently preoccupied on other fronts. The only hope and confidence is on "private entrepreneurship" who has never let down public aspirations in adversities in India, whether long term or short term.

This is an 'SOS' message to pharma/biotech/chemical industry entrepreneurs. It is time for us to wake up. Let us exhort the hitherto unfailing pharma entrepreneurs to invest in "people" to support pharma/science education and training into niche areas of pharmacological/ clinical/ regulatory and IP/patent fundamentals. The challenges in future can only be met by investing in creating "trained people" resources now. Any delay or continued neglect of this vital infrastructure input will be detrimental to the expected growth profile of the pharma industry and health needs of the country.

It is no secret that USA and other developed countries, as well as their MNCs, want India to bend over backwards to meet "TRIPs plus" compliance regime. Needless to say that "a billion plus" people, a large majority of whom are deprived and disadvantaged lot, need to be converted into "people assets" before India can seriously look at a "TRIPs plus" regime to address global concerns. It will be in the fitness of things, for the global community who is so much concerned with improving the "IP status" of India, to come forward and participate in the much needed proficiency building in the country. "One needs to sow before one reaps".

Pharma people asset building is the need of the hour. Let us all put our minds and heads together to address finding long term solutions to this otherwise disturbing trend where pharma trained specialists become endangered species.