

Business of drug development on verge of great change

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Significant changes to drug discovery and the pharmaceutical industry currently underway will increase in the next five to 10 years, according to a top researcher at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) who is helping transform the business of drug research and development.

According to Christopher Austin, M.D., director of the NIH Chemical Genomics Center (NCGC), both industry and academia welcome more cooperation in drug discovery to secure more efficient results for less financial burden than if they operate independently. “The increased participation of the public sector in therapeutics development is a trend that will be good for industry, academia, scientific discovery and the public at large,” says Dr. Austin.

These collaborative efforts have been facilitated by researchers moving from industry to academia to help close the gap that exists between basic early stage research and the identification of viable drug candidates for a range of diseases, particularly those that are less prevalent or for which the targets are less well validated. The hope is that better drugs to treat more diseases will be developed faster and less expensively than ever before.

Not only is Dr. Austin a scientist who wants his work to improve the lives of people affected by disease, he also is a former pharmaceutical industry researcher who understands the business of drug development, having previously worked at Merck & Co. for a number of years. He’s observed that industry scientists are constrained in the scope of targets

and diseases they study by commercial regulations imperatives which do not exist in the public sector. “The work we do at the NCGC is complementary to what industry does – we work on the 90% of new targets and diseases that industry doesn’t, and we make our data publicly available so all researchers, public and private, can use it to advance drug discovery.”

Marcie Glicksman, Ph.D., senior director of lead discovery, laboratory of drug discovery at the Harvard NeuroDiscovery Center and one of several co-presenters at the SBS meeting, also came from industry and has high hopes for the increased collaboration between “Big Pharma” and academia in drug discovery. “At Harvard, our mission is to develop new therapeutics for diseases with no disease modifying treatments such as Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s, or orphan diseases such as Huntington’s and Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (Lou Gehrig’s),” she states. “There are smaller numbers of patients affected by orphan diseases -- treatments for them are not considered billion dollar drugs, so they are much harder to develop in industry.”

Like Dr. Austin, Dr. Glicksman says it’s simply too expensive for industry to conduct this early stage research, and that is why the academic centers are so vital to the future of drug discovery for diseases that industry can’t address on its own.

Dr. Austin and Dr. Glicksman will speak at a session on this topic at the 14th Annual Conference & Exhibition of the Society for Biomolecular Sciences (SBS) April 6-10 at America’s Center in St. Louis.

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