

AstraZeneca Shuts B'lore R&D Unit

Entrepreneurs
upset as centre
used to provide)
ideas and learning

PEERZADA ABRAR
BANGALORE

British drugmaker AstraZeneca's decision to close its research and development centre in Bangalore is causing angst amongst biotechnology entrepreneurs in the country who have gained from the ideas and learning that it provided. Nearly half a dozen startups trace their roots to the 25-year-old centre that led critical research in areas such as tuberculosis and malaria.

"We are having sleepless nights," said Shrikumar Suryanarayan, director general at the Association of Biotechnology Led Enterprises (ABLE). "Turning it into an incubator is a better alternative," said the 53-year-old entrepreneur who is mentoring alternative fuel maker, Sea6 Energy.

The decision to shut the Avishkar research and development site, that employs 168, later this year was announced by AstraZeneca 10 days ago. "These changes reflect the company's strategic focus on investing in our core therapy areas and simplifying our R&D footprint," said Sudhir Nambiar, vice president, pharmaceutical development at AstraZeneca India.

Pharmaceutical development projects will either transfer to the company's Macclesfield site in the United Kingdom or be carried out by external providers.

"We have not taken this decision lightly and acknowledge the excellent work carried out

by our people in Bangalore," said Nambiar. Biotech entrepreneurs and scientists hope that instead of a complete closure the facility be converted into an innovation hub or incubator for new ventures.

"Astra(Zeneca) is to biotechnology what Texas Instruments was to electronics industry in terms of spawning entrepreneurship," said Anand Anandkumar managing director of Cellworks Research India.

"It is unfortunate it is shutting down when biotechnology entrepreneurship is at an inflection point."

Like Anandkumar a number of other scientists who worked at the centre have launched startups, this includes Gangagen, Xcyton Diagnostics, Bangalore Genie, Enzene and Aristogene.

"Astra energised Indian basic scientists towards goal oriented research which resulted into products," said BV Ravi Kumar, founder of XCyton Diagnostics, who launched the firm after working at Astra Research Centre for almost a decade. XCyton has developed a technology that allows immediate identification of multiple organisms that cause infections.

"I want the government to takeover, open up the facility for biotech companies as well as continue the drug discovery research," he said.

The paucity of incubators is a huge challenge for entrepreneurs like Ezhil Subbian, founder of String Bio, a startup which converts waste into chemicals used to make biodegradable plastics. Subbian who relocated to Bangalore from United States five months ago is still searching for a professional incubation centre. She hopes that the AstraZeneca facility is converted into one.

Company