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India emerging key in vaccine development

Anshul Dhamija & John | TNN

Bangalore: India is emerging as a major centre of vaccine development and manufacture. According to some industry estimates, nearly \$1 billion (Rs 5,000 crore) will be spent in the country in the coming years to develop vaccines for diseases like malaria, AIDS, cervical cancer, meningitis and Japanese encephalitis. The country also boasts one of the world's biggest and lowest cost manufacturers of vaccines — the Pune-based Serum

Institute of India. The company was recently designated by the World Health Organization to be one of the main manufacturers of the H1N1 (swine flu) vaccine. Serum has also won an order from WHO for the manufacture of the meningitis vaccine Men-A, which is expected to be ready in six months. "We offered to produce the vaccines at prices that were much lower than those offered by MNCs," Dr S D Ravetkar, senior director in Serum Institute told TOI at the Bangalore Bio conference held last week in Bangalore.



Serum has spent over \$300 million in the last 10 years to put up state-of-the-art facilities for vaccine manufacture. "The talent in India, our low overheads, economies of scale, and above all, our willingness to accept lower margins, enable us to keep prices down," Ravetkar said. Serum started manufacturing

the hepatitis vaccine at one-tenth the cost then prevailing. It's latest task is to bring out a vaccine for H1N1. The company expects to get the necessary material from WHO any day now, and production of the vaccine may start in 2 to 3 months. The other big vaccine major, GSK (Glaxo-Smithkline), has put in approximately \$400 million (Rs 2,000 crore) in India to develop various vaccines for malaria. The International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB) in New Delhi has just

done a proof of concept for a malaria vaccine and it has transferred the technology to Bharat Biotech for clinical trials. The ICGEB will be developing three more malaria vaccines. By the time these vaccines hit the market, over \$300 million would have been spent in research and development. The India chapter of International AIDS Vaccine Initiative, along with various government bodies is developing a vaccine for the treatment of AIDS. This is the third AIDS vaccine that IAVI is developing in India.