

# Making India a global competitor in drug discovery

Molecular biologists and former principal scientists at Ranbaxy laboratories, India, Dr Rashmi Barabhiya Dr Kasim Mookhtiar, are ready to set up a drug developmental laboratory in Pune. The lab, called ADVINUS Therapeutics Inc, promises to put India on the path of global competitiveness in drug discovery and engineering. Sam Rao talks to the two scientists in South San Francisco about their new venture.



(L to R) Marketing director EPPIC Prasad Jaladi, Dr Kasim Mookhtiar and Dr Rashmi Barabhiya. Sam Rao

## What is ADVINUS about?

**RB:** ADVINUS means 'Advantage India and US', especially as things are looking up for both countries.

The TATA's had got out of biopharma about five years ago and we talked about getting back into a scientific arena rather than a manufacturing one. You can say it is 'Knowledge Processing Services' which is what we are offering.

## Who are involved in the venture?

**RB:** We are funded by the Mumbai

based TATA Group and Ratan Tata himself is on board. Then we have Dr Kasim Mookhtiar and me. I am also a founder member and will serve as CEO of ADVINUS.

## What makes ADVINUS unique?

**RB:** We have nearly 50 years of experience just between us. I have

done 28 years in the US and Dr Mookhtiar has over 22 years experience in discovering and engineering molecules. We can offer our combined experience. The things to watch out for in partnerships are always—stability, experience and deliverability of the team. We believe we have all of that at ADVINUS.

## What are plans for the future?

**KM:** We are planning to hire about 30 bright R&D scientists and engineers in the next one and a half years. We plan to staff the facility with mostly NRIs from the US and possibly Europe.

**RB:** Our custom design and R&D laboratory is based in Pune's Hinjewadi Bio Technology Park. In Bangalore too, we have acquired Tata groups' Rallis development center to serve as our business development arm.

## What about education in India in this area?

**KM:** What we need in India is more bio-knowledge. We are very good at engineering. We also need to be able to 'ask' the questions. We need more bio-knowledge to frame the question—and then our engineers will get the solution.

## Do you think this can happen?

**KM:** To ensure this, our laboratory

will be doing its bit. We are working with educational institutions to offer scholarships to support research and also recommending and implementing bio-discovery in academic curriculum as well.

## What is the government's role?

**RB:** Even the government is waking up and taking proactive steps. For example, I am on one of the advisory panel to the Presidents Commission on biotech and pharma industry. With new policies on safeguarding Intellectual Property (IP) issues, government incentives being offered, it is clear that cost effective research can safely be taken up by large drug companies. From a cost savings point, easily 40-50 percent savings are possible in the short term by utilizing developmental laboratories. We decided to set up in India for many reasons including wanting to give back to our homeland and strengthen ties with the US.

# Family night brings together IIT Alumni

RENU MEHTA

Woodbridge

AROUND 300 people attended the IITAC Family Night Dinner on November 26 at the Pine Valley Banquet Hall in Woodbridge. The event brought together members from the different IITs in India including Kharagpur, Chennai, Mumbai, Delhi, Kanpur, Guwahati and Roorkee.

"The IITAC Family Night Dinner is an annual event held to celebrate the festive season, where our members come with their families and friends to network, reminisce about the good old IIT days, meet old friends and make some new ones and enjoy the music and entertainment," said Raghu Nayak, President of the organization.

Amongst the audience was the Consul General of India, Satish Mehta who quoted a recent *London Times* article in which IIT was named the third most prestigious educational institution after MIT and Berkeley. "This shows that IIT is a remarkable institution and the brand name enjoys such high esteem," he said. "The Consulate would like to work more closely with the IIT Alumni and discuss ways to leverage your experiences," he added.

The IIT Alumni's mandate in Canada strives to help, support, promote and foster a sense of community, fellowship and professionalism among the alumni living in Canada



Consul General Satish Mehta with IIT Alumni executives

and facilitate settlement of new immigrants in the country. The organization, with around 600 members and an elected board of 13 directors, holds around four events annually that includes a family night, a professional night, a seminar and a social event.

"I met my IIT fellow students after 27 years through one of these events," says Rakesh Sharma, a graduate of IIT Delhi and a vice president with the organization. "We were in the same hostel in Delhi and it's like an instantaneous emotional bonding."

The Alumni has also created a special mentoring program called IITians for IITians or IFI, a unique self help group that matches mentees with mentors who then monitor and

guide the mentee for job search, opportunities and referrals. The Association is a strategic partner in the Mentoring Partnership program of Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC).

Rabiz Foda is a past president of IIT Alumni and mentors five mentees. "We have a structured mentoring program under which we have to devote 24 hours with a mentee over a period of three months," says Foda. "We help the mentee with their resume, tailor the job search to the right people and provide leads in the hidden job market."

Under the program, Foda says, the focus is on finding 'the job' and not a job, meaning a job that the person would like to stay in.

# ASAAP's AIDS Day event to feature South Asian artists

**TORONTO:** The Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention (ASAAP) is organizing a special event on December 3 to commemorate World AIDS Day.

Entitled, "HIV: Hope in Vision," the event will have four South Asian artists render live paintings on issues around HIV/AIDS that will be later sold at a silent auction. The new 2005 poster on acceptance of people living with HIV/AIDS will also be unveiled on the occasion. Noted Indo-Canadian documentary filmmaker Ali Kazimi, a special guest, will deliver a keynote address.

The program will be held at Gallery 401, 401 Richmond Street West, Suite 240 in Toronto.

"It is important to continue to raise awareness and understanding about HIV/AIDS and remember the millions of people living with HIV/AIDS all over the world. Today, the issue affects all of us and by working together can we win our fight against AIDS," said Seema Opal, executive director of ASAAP.

"The evening is dedicated to all AIDS victims and to the forty million people living with HIV/AIDS all over the world. We would also like to pay tributes to acknowledge the unrelenting efforts of the global community in their fight against AIDS," adds Opal.

ASAAP is a non-profit organization committed to health promotion, support, education, and advocacy in a non-discriminatory manner for South Asians living with and affected by HIV/AIDS. Since its inception in 1989, ASAAP has delivered many services and programs to increase awareness, help AIDS prevention and ensure the well being of the community. The organization is the brainchild of KHUSH, a support and social group for Queer South Asians, which instantly reacted and took action when two South Asians living with HIV died in isolation, because they could not find services in their own language. The initiative grew in strength and has today become one of the most powerful community voices on sexuality, culture, identity etc.

—Express News Service

# FCR Secretariat will help new immigrants: Dhalla

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

Ottawa

THE Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development announced the creation of a Foreign Credential Recognition (FCR) Secretariat within Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), that will focus and consolidate the work currently underway within its FCR program.

MP Ruby Dhalla, who championed this cause, believes the creation of the Secretariat will be

a significant step forward in helping to address the difficulties many new Canadians with foreign credentials encounter.

"We as a nation must utilize the tremendous talent and potential of Canadians with foreign credentials," she says. "The Secretariat is another reflection of the

Government's commitment to ensuring that we as a nation are prepared for the future demands

of our labour market. The recognition of foreign credentials has a direct impact on our economic growth, prosperity and competitiveness as a nation."

On June 4, a motion introduced by the MP calling on the government to create a Secretariat was passed in the House of Commons with overwhelming support from her colleagues from across Canada.

"Many new Canadians come

to Canada with dreams and aspirations only to find it difficult to get their qualifications recognized and accredited," says Dhalla. "Many immigrants, therefore, do not find jobs in their own profession."

The secretariat would work with all stakeholders and provincial representatives to coordinate and collaborate on activities, implement processes, and assist in the research and the development of national standards that recognize foreign-training credentials in Canada.

