

'I am a mere catalyst in Cipla's growth'

THE success of Cipla in bringing the global pharma majors to their knees by offering their patented anti-AIDS drugs at cheap price to victims in developing countries is now history.

*But few know the contribution of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) in this episode, especially that of **AV Rama Rao** who helped the company's successful foray into copying of patented drugs.*

*Cipla's consultant since 1971, Mr Rao said that company managing director Yusuf Hamied initially did not want to manufacture the anti-AIDS drugs. "I forced him," he added. Excerpts from the interview with **Mr Rao**, who modestly describes his role in Cipla's growth as a 'catalyst'.*

Mr Hamied says the anti-AIDS drugs that he is offering cheaply to the world today were developed in cooperation with CSIR laboratories especially Indian Institute of Chemical Technology (IICT) at Hyderabad and National Chemical Laboratory (NCL) in Pune. Please elaborate?

AIDS came to my attention when there was first death in India in 1989. The drug AZT (zidovudine) was known but too expensive for most Indians. So I decided to make it in IICT when I was its director and succeeded. We produced 500 gm of AZT. When I approached Mr Hamied he said: "What is the use? Where are the AIDS cases?" He did not want to produce it.

What made him change his mind?

Two things. By 1991 the number of HIV cases in India showed an increasing trend. Secondly, we reduced the cost several fold. Earlier we imported the intermediate beta thiomidine. It was expensive (\$400/kg) because it was being produced from ribose that is also costly (\$200/kg).

We developed a method of producing beta thiomidine from Xylose, which cost \$10/kg. We have a US patent on that. Mr Hamied purchases this know-how from the US for Rs 500,000. I think. CSIR gave him the technology on condition that Cipla will market the AZT on a no-profit basis. This was in 1991. Stavudine and Lamivudine quickly followed.

Why it took long for Indian AZT to hit market?

Because the drug controller was sitting on Cipla's application (for manufacturing and marketing). He wanted Cipla to conduct clinical trial and Mr Hamied was frustrated. I got so annoyed one day I called the drug controller and warned him — "If you do not clear the drug in 24 hours, I will let the Prime Minister know you are blocking treatment of HIV cases". It worked. The next day Cipla's AZT was cleared.

Cipla must have profited from other sponsored projects at CSIR.

Of course. Cipla's blockbuster anti-cancer drugs vinblastine and vincristine, came from NCL. Interestingly Mr Hamied turned down both when offered — "You say I have to invest Rs 2 crore and the Indian market is worth just Rs 25 lakh. Don't you know I can get Rs 50 lakh by just putting the money in bank? Even a fool will not invest".

Next day I went to him again and said, "Look, patents on these drugs are to expire in 1986, you have three years to develop these and by the time you commercialise it, entire world will be your market, not just India". Today these drugs are among Cipla's major money earners.

When did you meet Mr Hamied?

I was then a fresh Harvard returned chemist at NCL. During one of my visits to Bombay in 1971 a trader took me to Mr Hamied who was then R&D Chief at Cipla. When I told him I was working on a process to make diazepam, Roche's anti-anxiety blockbuster, he jumped and said "Let me buy your technology".

Next week he came to Pune and signed the deal with NCL director K Venkataraman paying Rs 30,000 as technology fee, and hired me as Cipla's consultant — first one from a CSIR lab to an Indian industry.

What did you do as a consultant?

Give him ideas about new methods of synthesising patented drugs on a non-exclusive basis. After his father died in 1972, he wanted me to become R&D Chief in his Bangalore lab and gave me a blank cheque. But I declined and told him I would continue as consultant. I am his consultant even now. (PTI)



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