
Editorial

In August, the Australian biotechnology trade association, AusBiotech, held its annual conference and exhibition in Adelaide, a beautiful city even in the middle of the southern winter – which is not really winter at all by the standards of northern Europe. At the request of the UK biotechnology trade organisation, BIA, I led a mission of a dozen UK biotechnology companies, sponsored by the Department of Trade and Industry, to participate in AusBiotech 2003. We found enormous interest, not only in our companies and their capabilities but in the prospect of broader international collaboration to drive forward the development of a commercially viable bioscience-based industry in Australia. Indeed, I was interviewed ten times over a period of two weeks by various arms of the media, and other members of the team were also interviewed – demonstrating that the interest in biotechnology and its relevance to Australia's future stretches far beyond just the professional researchers to embrace government, the financial community and the man in the street.

Australia has long been famed for the quality, and value for money, of its science research. It punches far above its weight in measurements such as numbers of papers published and citations of those papers in other papers – the acknowledged measure of the quality of publications. However, it has equally long been notoriously poor at turning that research into sources of community wealth and skilled employment. As a result, one can find many skilled expatriate Australians, flourishing abroad, who have outgrown their homeland's ability to provide them with a challenging, productive and rewarding career at home.

However, AusBiotech 2003 showed that all that might be about to change.

Not long before AusBiotech 2003, it was announced that a prominent Californian venture capital group had begun raising a fund of A\$200m (about US\$140m) for investment in Australian biotechnology and, during the meeting, outlines of two further fund raisings (totalling about A\$300m) became known. If these funds are fully subscribed – and the quality of their sponsors suggests they will be – they will deliver around A\$500m into the Australian biotechnology development market. That should have the effect of not just increasing the *volume* of development work but transforming the *nature* of the activity performed in Australia. This level of funding would make it possible, for the first time, to undertake in Australia significant Phase II and Phase III clinical trials on locally developed drug candidates, thus capturing for Australian investors a place further up the value chain than has ever been achieved before. As more value accrues to new drug development sponsors in Australia, yet more of it will be done – a snowball effect, if that is a description applicable in Australia!

In parallel with this potential surge in funding, Australia is experiencing something of an influx of the scarce skills necessary to drive these development programmes forward. Groups such as IMB and UniSeed in Queensland and BioComm in Victoria are showing that they can deliver – and entities such as the newly created Australian Institute for Commercialisation are upgrading the entrepreneurial infrastructure.

Like many of the attendees, I sensed the buzz of excitement in the conference and exhibition halls – the feeling that something significant is starting to happen at last. And homesick expatriates are starting to consider the feasibility of repatriation.

I look forward with anticipation to the next AusBiotech meeting, which will be held in the subtropical city of Brisbane from 7th to 10th November, 2004. With a meeting held at a time when northern Europe and North America will be gloomy and cold, the perfect Queensland weather should be an attraction. With the Australian economy likely

still to be growing strongly (as it has done for the past five years) and with the developments that are now starting to be seen in biotechnology in Australia, there should be huge interest from Europe and North America, not least from Australian expatriates, in what is unveiled at AusBiotech 2004.

The potential for productive partnerships between the established major world biotechnology markets and Australia, delivering fair rewards to each, is now greater than it has ever been and I would encourage all readers of this Journal to look into the possibilities for themselves. Brisbane has the ambition to become the biotechnology hub of the Asia–Pacific region in what is being hailed as the Pacific Century and AusBiotech 2004 is where we should see that promise starting to be delivered.

I plan to be in Brisbane next November – I hope to see you there.

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