

To the Readers

In all probability, by the time you receive this issue of Biotech News, the year 2010 would have come to an end. The United Nations designated 2010 as the 'Year of Biodiversity' presumably to celebrate the diversity of life forms on earth and remind us of the importance of conserving this diversity and utilizing it sustainably. So what happened during the year? How did it affect you? Or anyone? Did it create a better awareness regarding biodiversity conservation or utilization? Not surprisingly, most of the targets for reining in biodiversity losses and enhancing sustainable use of biodiversity set by the Convention on Biological Diversity in 2002 and endorsed by the World Summit on Sustainable Development as well as incorporated by the UN General Assembly in the Millennium Development Goals have not been met. Under these circumstances, what have we got to celebrate? More importantly, what purpose do such declarations serve? We posed these questions to two sets of experts on biodiversity. K. N. Ganeshiah and R. Uma Shaanker cast doubt on the validity of biodiversity as a science, question the rate at which biodiversity is being lost, and express misgivings on the current paradigms of conservation (pg. 216). Kamaljit Bawa on the other hand offers a counter view on these issues (pg. 217).

The National Biotechnology Development Strategy proposed setting aside up to 30% of DBT's budget for public-private partnership programmes by the end of the current Five Year Plan. One of the schemes designed to meet this goal was the Biotechnology Industry Partnership Programme (BIPP) aimed at supporting innovation and discovery in the biotech industry. BIPP's objective is to make the Indian biotech sector more competitive globally through sharing the risk of conducting pathbreaking research in cutting edge areas. Additionally, the industry owns the IPR. Judging by the number of applications received, the scheme has been widely welcomed by the industry. Suraksha Diwan et al. provide more details on the scheme (pg.226), and six industry recipients of the BIPP grant take stock of the scheme's success so far.

Ask any young faculty member in the country to name the most daunting task on joining an institution. I would wager that the likeliest answer would be: setting up a research lab. This is made all the more difficult in institutions such as state universities where, more often than not, there is no provision for a start-up grant. Indeed, most institutions do not see this as a priority. Unless luck intervenes, the only option is to swallow one's pride, and subsume one's own research priorities and initiatives and piggyback on senior faculty. By the time a successful research grant is won, middle age would have arrived. Doubtless, part of the initial enthusiasm would have waned and many a bright spark would have been extinguished. Without doubt, there is an urgent need for funding agencies to reduce the age of their principal investigators and groom and mentor young talent at the start of their research careers. It is with this intention that DBT started the Rapid Grant for Young Investigators scheme. K. Dharmalingam and T. S. Rao take a reality check on how the programme has been running since its initiation in 2005 (pg. 230). We also asked five young researchers for their views on the programme (pg. 231).

In spite of major scientific advances, malaria looms large in the world, particularly the developing economies. In Africa alone, more than a million children succumb each year to this pernicious disease. We caught up with Peter Agre, one of the leading researchers on malaria and a recipient of the 2003 Nobel Prize in Chemistry for an exclusive, freewheeling discussion on malaria (pg. 220). Agre shared the Nobel with R. MacKinnon for the discovery of aquaporins, channels that facilitate and regulate the transport of water molecules through cell membranes.

We have featured the Bose Institute, Kolkata in our institution section (pg 234). Other interesting pieces include reports on the progress of the Solanaceae (tomato family) genome initiative (pg. 232) and the Infosys Award for life sciences to Chetan Chitnis, International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, incidentally for his outstanding work on malaria (pg. 224).

On behalf of Biotech News, season's greetings and best wishes for the new year! ■

S. Natesh

Editor-in-Chief

E-mail: natesh.dbt@nic.in