Interview with Takeshi Yura, Senior Director, Albany Molecular Research, Inc. (AMRI)

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Tags: Albany Molecular Research

Prior to joining AMRI you worked in diverse companies in Japan, like Dishman, Pfizer and Bayer. What attracted you to this company?

The main reason is that Singapore has growing opportunities in drug discovery. I worked for a few years in business development with Dishman and although I enjoyed this work, I thought that I wasn't utilizing all of my abilities and experience in drug discovery.

Then this opportunity at AMRI came up, which is a technical/scientific leadership position where I could use my skills in drug discovery. Given the trend of Singapore growing its R&D capabilities, this was a prime location to be in. That was two years ago, and I am happy with my decision to have come over.

What have been AMRI's priorities over the last couple of years?

The past two years have seen very rapid growth for AMRI in Singapore. Initially established as a satellite laboratory scale chemistry CRO within AMRI's global platform, we also established an in vitro biology group 4 years ago. We have continued to add research biologists and we anticipate expanding further in the near future. The main challenges have been managing our rapid expansion and helping biology evolve and add resources and capabilities. AMRI started in 1991 as a chemistry outsourcing company and many people still think of us only as a chemistry provider. But as outsourcing has evolved, biology is key to many of our customer's needs, particularly for

projects that require the CRO to be able to solve problems and offer suggestions to advance the program. Therefore, we are expanding our biology capabilities to better position my organization to participate and contribute to integrated projects, which require expertise in chemistry and biology as part of a whole drug discovery package.

Just a few months ago, AMRI announced the launch of a “Smartsourcing”. What is the premise of this model and how does it fit into the Singaporean operations?

“Smartsourcing” is an approach that AMRI has been taking for some time, but the model that has started in April has put a very good name to our approach. This model emphasizes AMRI’s capabilities and breadth of experience spanning from early drug discovery all the way to manufacturing commercial products.. The way that I see it is that we bring together the flexibility and the expertise we have in our organizations to best serve customer needs, without the need for our customers to have to compromise. SmartSourcing goes beyond the transactional process of just getting orders from customers and meeting their requirements. It defines more of a collaborative approach. In this framework we can input our intellectual problem solving capabilities and our expertise, and anticipate the needs of the customer to work together to achieve the ultimate objective, which is success in their project.

Although AMRI has several locations around the world, my colleagues in Singapore can function as an independent unit, meaning that we have the biology and the chemistry to perform high end drug discovery research. However, we are also closely tied with our colleagues in the US and also in India, so depending on the nature of the project we can easily tap into the expertise or budget advantages in those other sites. For more complex projects we sometimes work with all the sites together on the same program.
In terms of AMRI’s global sites, Singapore has the largest medicinal chemistry footprint. Each site has its own mix of capabilities and expertise and we constantly communicate to bring all of these capabilties to bear depending on the needs of a given project.
Singapore is the only site within the AMRI network that has both discovery biology and chemistry under one roof, which gives us an advantage within the group to execute integrated programs right here in Singapore.

With the closing of AMRI’s facility in Hungary, which of the other units have absorbed its responsibilities?

Most of the Hungarian capabilities, primarily library preparation capabilities, including the hardware (equipment) and the expertise, were shifted to Hyderabad in India earlier in 2012.

One of AMRI’s 2012 initiatives is enhancing its international footprint in Europe and in Asia. What will be Singapore’s role in this?

Traditionally our customers have been mainly from the U.S. and Europe, but we see a rising interest in Japan. Given our location in Asia, our task is to increase AMRI’s presence in this region. We have a customer base in Japan and we have been growing business relations in the country over the past couple of years.

We would also like to increase our customer portfolio here in Singapore and in some of the neighboring countries. China and India at the moment are more our competitors rather than customers, since they have a high percentage of CROs, but as the whole R&D landscape in Asia develops, there definitely will be customers emerging from these markets as well. We want to be in a good position to capture those needs and being in Singapore will definitely be advantageous.

Despite the rising of this region, the major breakthroughs have still come from the U.S. and Europe. When can we start to see new drugs coming out of Asia?

It is going to be a long process. Everyone in the industry realizes that drug discovery is not an easy task.

Even if you look at a country like my country, Japan, where there have been several blockbusters. But if you look back, the breakthrough blockbusters really only started in the 1980’s. Up to then, despite that there was an active pharmaceutical industry for many decades, original innovative drugs only started coming out in the last 20 or 30 years. So it does take time to build up the expertise, the talent base, the skill and the experience. The hardware part, such as obtaining the latest equipment, can be relatively quickly managed,. Building the talent base and the experience, on the other hand is a different, more difficult matter

It has been only 10 years or so since Singapore started its BMS initiative, and it was decided that pharmaceuticals would become the 4th pillar of the manufacturing sector. Ten years is still a very short period for building up the talent and experience. Once you build up the local talent and tap into the experience of success, it will really start the ball rolling. We have not reached that stage yet, but Singapore will ultimately get there, in my opinion.

The pharmaceutical industry is going through a rough period— no blockbusters coupled with slow drug development. Partnerships are proving to be a promising solution for improving this downturn. What are the collaborations that AMRI has with companies?

Many of the European and American companies are looking into collaboration as a way to contain their R&D costs and find more effective ways to find drugs, because if you look back at the last 10 to 20 years, the record has not been so encouraging. Although there have been dramatic scientific breakthroughs, they have not translated into more drugs coming into the market. The number of approved drugs has remained static over the last 10 years, although 2011 being slightly better than the other previous years. So now, the major companies that were traditionally the engines of drug discovery are looking for new ways to improve productivity and collaboration opportunities are one of the areas of their focus.

A lot of these collaborations are targeted for Asia. We are no exception, as we are working on several drug discovery programs with MNCs. We take a very active role in these projects, we contribute to the design of molecules, we analyze the biological results and basically we try to work as a team, similar to an in-house team where the scientists have access to all the relevant data. We consider each other as “colleagues”— not a one-way relationship but very much a collaboration in which we contribute as equals and provide our intellectual input into the programs.

How successful has AMRI been in R&D applications and partnerships?

The number of clinical candidates and INDs that have emerged from our collaborations over the last decade are testament to our progress. One indication of our success is that many of the programs we have collaborated on have resulted in candidates being taken into clinical trials by our customers (72 preclinical and clincal candidates). Our success rate of identifying IND candidates is above the industry norm and is close to 50%. Our scientists continue to publish and are listed as inventors on numerous patents, which is another measure of our scientific contribution to these programs.

Do you have a focus on any particular therapeutic areas and what is the distribution of your portfolio?

A large part of our portfolio today is focused inoncology, but that doesn’t mean weare just an oncology specialist; it just reflects the current needs of our customers. We work in multiple other therapeutic areas including CNS, cardiovascular, infectious diseases and others, essentially covering a wide spectrum.

Where will AMRI (Singapore) be in 5 years from now?

In terms of infrastructure, we anticipate a need for continued expansion. We have already built new fully equipped chemistry labs, which we are planning to begin filling in 2013. Ultimately, when the

current expansion plans are complete, we expect to employ more than 200 scientists in both biology and chemistry combined. We want to keep working on these partnerships and integrated drug discovery programs here from Singapore.

Human resources are always a challenge for this industry. One of the features of AMRI is that you have the highest ratio of PhDs compared to your competitors. How has AMRI managed to build such a team?

Up to now, we have recruited people from all over the world, particularly from Asian areas, mainly India and China but also neighboring countries like Malaysia and Indonesia. We also employ scientists who have joined us from Europe and the U.S. We have a very diverse group— out of about 100 scientists we have approximately 15 nationalities. An advantage of Singapore is that it is possible to recruit talent from all over the world. Although the scientific level of local Singaporean universities is quite high, the actual number of graduates is currently somewhat limited, so we have a smaller percentage of Singaporeans. We definitely want to increase local talent and we are working together with the universities in many ways. We will be starting internships from the universities and the polytechnics, some of our staff will be lecturing, giving courses in medicinal chemistry and applied chemistry at the universities and we will also help in training of students. We want to work with the universities to further build up the skills of their students so they are better prepared to work in the industry.

Furthermore, we plan to be here for the long term and it takes time to build up the talent base. AMRI would like to help contribute to the universities and the country and boost the talent pool in order to have a more vibrant R&D landscape in Singapore.

What are AMRI’s most exciting projects?

Each project is exciting in its own way. Some exciting ones are projects where we really feel that we are approaching a clinical candidate and where we think that we are close to finding something that will go further into clinical trials. We are not always informed of what happens to a molecule once our customer moves it forward on their own, but we do sense that we are making progress. Other exciting projects are very early stage projects where we identify compounds that we think can be optimized and go into the discovery pipeline.. In other projects, the challenging chemistry itself can be very exciting to work on and overcome.

Given AMRI’s impressive growth, what are the next steps and what are some challenges that you expect to face?

We believe that in the future integrated programs, chemistry and biology combined, are going to be a key service and growth driver of AMRI. A major task we are facing is the need to clear the misconception that still may persist that we only focus on chemistry and to raise awareness that we do have biology experience, capabilities and a record of accomplishment. Expansion is another task. It will not be easy to grow the site to 200 scientists and maintain the high level of performance that we instilled in our culture. To do this, obviously the recruitment and the training will certainly be challenging.

Have you changed your management style after joining AMRI?

At AMRI in Singapore, we are mainly involved in drug discovery research, which requires the same skills whether you are working in an MNC or a CRO. With a myriad of nationalities on my staff, the research team is different here than in Japan, but scientists have more in common with each other and regardless of cultural background we do speak a common language. So no, I haven’t changed my style dramatically, but since we are a younger group here, one thing we need to put more effort into is training people in research. I put more emphasis on that here in AMRI than when I was working in Pfizer and Bayer back in Japan.

In terms of drug discovery, everyone speaks of India & China but there are warnings that the international community shouldn’t always follow the trends. Which country in your opinion has more chances of success?

I think inevitably China and India have large markets and a large employee pool to draw on, so they will develop for sure. Singapore being a small nation can never compete in terms of market size. I see the rationale of a pharma company setting up their research bases in these (India, China) countries. However, I do also believe that in drug discovery and R&D, it is not the market size alone but also the talent pool, either local or ability to attract people to work in that country. For R&D, it is important to have a diverse cultural base and Singapore is well equipped for that. Another aspect of course is Singapore ranking at the top for IP legal infrastructure; customers need to feel secure in sharing confidential information with us and the strong IP landscape in Singapore is definitely an advantage.

So although Sinapore may not be spoken of as much as India or China, I believe that Singapore has great potential to grow in the drug discovery field.

What would you like to be your final message to our readers?

AMRI is a company that has actual experience in drug discovery with a proven track record of finding molecules that have successfuly advanced into the clinical stage and beyond. We certainly

have in-house drug discovery expertise and we are a company that is capable of providing services that cover the whole spectrum, from discovery to manufacturing. We are capable of bringing all the expertise together within the Smartsourcing model. We are one of the very few companies that has the flexibility, the expertise and actually offer such services to the customer at a reasonable cost.

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