

Novartis opens non-profit research institute in Siena, Italy

# Giving Charity a Chance

The newly founded Novartis Vaccines Institute for Global Health is intended to deliver vaccines to developing countries at an affordable price, says Daniel Vasella, CEO of Novartis. He didn't mention that his company could benefit too. Or is Novartis more altruistic than grumbling cynics assume?

Pharmaceutical giant Novartis (Basel, Switzerland) has established a not-for-profit research institute in Siena, Italy. The Novartis Vaccines Institute for Global Health (NVGH) will develop vaccines for diseases of the developing world "by researching vaccines specifically tailored for developing country needs and introducing them first in those countries". The new institute is located close to Novartis' com-

mercial Vaccines and Diagnostics global research center, also in Siena, but its projects will be managed separately, the company says. The NVGH will focus on research and development and will license a third party to develop and distribute the vaccines at an affordable and accessible price to the target populations, says Daniel Vasella, CEO of Novartis.

Initial research will focus on several *Salmonella* strains, which are important causes of typhus infection and disease in children, resulting in more than 4.5 billion cases of diarrhoeal disease per year around the globe. A vast majority of the estimated 1.8 million deaths per annum occur in developing countries, according to the WHO. The first NVGH project aims to develop a broad-range vaccine for *Salmonella* infections.

churned out three Nobel prizes (awarded to Denmark's Niels Kaj Jerne, Georges Köhler from Germany and the Japanese Susumu Tonegawa).

Novartis achieved net sales of nearly €26 billion and a net income of something around €4.4 billion last year. A charity project like the NVGH (which, coincidentally, is also likely to be a subliminal but extremely effective advertising tool!) is no more than peanuts for the powerful Swiss pharmaceutical group.

is no more than peanuts for the powerful Swiss pharmaceutical group.

## Not-for-profit mission has its limits

But Novartis isn't entirely ignoring its capitalist urges, of course. Its commercial vaccine subcom-

pany, Novartis Behring, is planning an ambitious expansion in Marburg, Germany, where the Swiss pharmaceutical company wants to establish two new vaccine production facilities. When construction work finishes in 2010, Novartis wants to begin the production of vaccines for rabies and tick-borne encephalitis. In addition to its current 1,200 employees in Marburg, Novartis officials say that they will create 80 new jobs.

One thing is certain: The sum that Novartis will invest in the Marburg site far exceeds their expenditures on the NVGH.

WINFRIED KOEPELLE



The historic center of Siena has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Nice view for the NVGH scientists who soon will do vaccine research for less developed countries here.

commercial Vaccines and Diagnostics global research center, also in Siena, but its projects will be managed separately, the company says. The NVGH will focus on research and development and will license a third party to develop and distribute the vaccines at an affordable and accessible price to the target populations, says Daniel Vasella, CEO of Novartis.



NVGH's designated head, Allan Saul, a malaria specialist.

Head of the new institute will be Allan Saul (photo left), a Novartis vaccine researcher and former member of the Laboratory of Malaria and Vector Research at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases in the USA. Saul has a 30 years experience in developing vaccines and has brought several vaccine candidates into clinical trials.

## Not the first project of its kind

However, it cannot be said (as Novartis did) that the NVGH "is the first institute of its kind to be set up by a major vaccine manufacturer". Taking the Novartis Institute for Tropical Diseases (NITD) as an example, the Swiss company itself has already established a similar research institute in Singapore's Biopolis. The NITD, founded in 2002, is a public-private partnership between Novartis and the state of Singapore, dedicated to developing pharmaceutical drugs for dengue fever and tuberculosis.

Moreover, kindly neighbours on Novartis' Basel doorstep have also flexed their charitable muscles in recent years. Business rival Hoffmann-LaRoche (now Roche) ran a similar institution, the Basel Institute for Immunology (BII), between 1969 and 2000, which contributed to significant advances in science's understanding of the immune system. A basic research institute, the BII had unrestricted access to \$24 million (€16 million) per year and, as a welcome side effect,



Foto: Sean Warren/Stockphoto

## Freelance Biobusiness Writers Wanted

(Applications from UK, France & Scandinavia especially welcome)

Please contact:  
wk@lab-times.org