NEWS IN BRIEF


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Neglected disease R&D funding hits new high

Funders poured US$3.6 billion into neglected disease R&D in 2017, found the annual G-FINDER report. This marked an all-time high since the report started tracking such contributions in 2007. There was a $230 million (7%) boost from 2016 funding levels, which is the largest relative and absolute increase since 2008.

To compile the annual G-FINDER report, a team from the Policy Cures Research charity surveyed 197 research organizations and industry groups and scoured publically available databases to identify funding for R&D efforts focused on 33 neglected diseases.

Investments into HIV and AIDS (of $1.26 billion), malaria (of $624 million) and tuberculosis (of $615 million) account for 70% of the total funding, they report. This is in line with investments in previous years. Funding into helminth infections was up 18% (to $89 million) and diarrhoeal disease funding was up 6% (to $164 million). Hepatitis C funding was down 47% (to $15 million), dengue funding was down 28% (to $81 million) and bacterial pneumonia and meningitis funding was down 21% (to $76 million). There was a substantial increase in investment into non-disease-specific R&D, the team found.

As in previous years, the public sector is the biggest funder of neglected disease R&D, contributing $2.32 billion, or 65%, of the total. The US government contributed $1.6 billion. But increased funding from the UK and the European Commission, to bring their respective contributions up to $186 million and $119 million, narrowed the gap a little between the US and the runner-up funders. The increased investments from the UK and the European Commission, as well as from India and Germany, drove the overall 2017 funding increases, the authors report.

The philanthropic sector spent $692 million on this field, an almost unchanged sum from 2016. This was led by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which contributed a total of $553 million in 2017. Last year, the foundation also launched a non-profit biotech called the Bill & Melinda Gates Medical Research Institute to take on malaria, tuberculosis and diarrhoeal diseases.

Industry groups meanwhile invested $554 million into neglected disease R&D in 2017, down slightly from the previous year and ending 5 consecutive years of industry funding increases. "This is not necessarily cause for alarm," the authors note. "While any further decline would be worth monitoring closely, this slight fall should be viewed in the context of the strong recent growth, and the way industry investment is driven by the state of the product pipeline." The clinical development of Medicines for Malaria Venture and GlaxoSmithKline's tafenoquine drove increased malaria funding in prior years, for example, resulting in that drug's approval last year.

Asher Mullard

Pharmaceutical market growth set to slow?

The global pharmaceutical market is expected to exceed US$1.5 trillion by 2023, shows an annual report by analysts at IQVIA. But the group forecasted a 3–6% compound annual growth rate in the next 5 years, down from an average of 6.3% over the past 5 years.

By geographic region, the outlook report predicted 4–7% growth for the US, and 5–8% growth in the emerging markets. The top five European markets by contrast are only on track for 1–4% growth, and Japan could see a decline of −3–0%. China, the largest emerging market for biopharmaceuticals, could see sales of $140–170 billion by 2023. But whereas China's market achieved double-digit growth rates in 2014, the analysts expect the pace to slow down to 3–6% in the next half decade.

A robust pipeline is poised to continue to provide high levels of newly approved products, the analysts also found. They forecast an average of 54 new active substances per year over the next 5 years, up from 46 in the past 5 years. But these new drugs will account for a smaller share of brand spending than in the past. This is in line with observations from analysts at Boston Consulting Group who have seen falling average peak sales forecasts for recently approved drugs.

IQVIA expects that nearly two-thirds of new launches will be specialty products. Oncology will see the biggest number of new approvals and new spending in the next 5 years. They forecast 70–90 newly launched oncology products during this time, up from 57 in the past 5 years.

The report also highlights the potential for the arrival of 5–8 new "next-generation biotherapeutics", including cell-based therapies, chimeric antigen receptor T cells, gene therapies and regenerative medicines such as stem-cell-based products. This is a slower rate of approval for these products than they previously predicted, but they note that this is still a key area to watch because of the high cost of these therapeutics and their potential to provide substantial clinical benefits.

Asher Mullard

FDA plans Office of Drug Evaluation Science

US regulators are preparing to create an Office of Drug Evaluation Science, said FDA commissioner Scott Gottlieb at the annual J.P. Morgan Healthcare Conference in January.

Once in a place, the 52-person team will focus on monitoring and supporting biomarker development, evaluating patient-focused efficacy and safety end points, and assessing the use of information technology in clinical trial decision making. The team will be part of the Office of New Drugs.

This is part of a bigger revamp of the drug review process. "Eventually the drug review process will look a lot different," Gottlieb told *STAT*. The plans are in the final stages of review, and the office is set to be launched later this year.

Asher Mullard