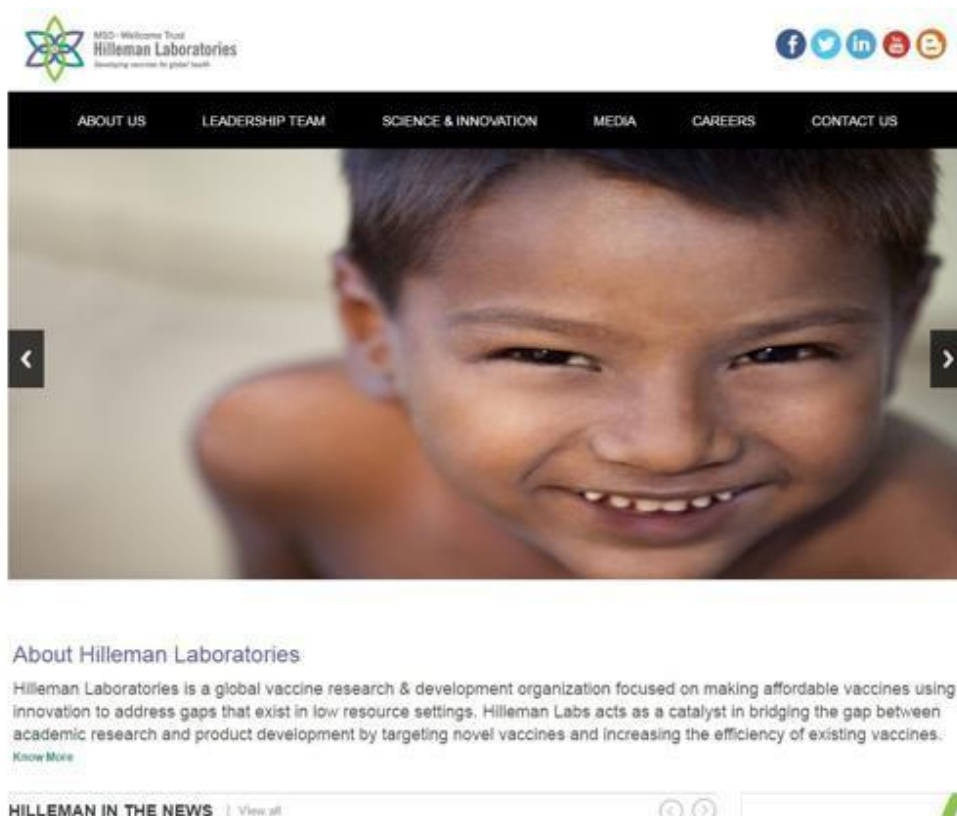


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Hilleman Lab scouts for partners to launch rotavirus vaccine in India

A heat-stable rotavirus vaccine will eliminate the need for cold-storage facilities, driving down costs and also partially removing logistical inefficiencies.



Hilleman is presently developing vaccines to treat rotavirus, cholera and meningitis, with the rotavirus vaccine in the Phase I/II clinical trial stage.

New Delhi: Hilleman Laboratories, an initiative between pharmaceutical giant Merck & Co (MSD Pharmaceuticals in India) and UK-based charitable organization Wellcome Trust, is in talks to partner domestic and global vaccine companies to manufacture and market its thermostable, or heat-resistant, rotavirus vaccine in India.

The research-based company, which largely works in the space of low-cost vaccines to prevent paediatric diseases in developing countries, is owned equally by both MSD and Wellcome Trust.

“We are currently discussing potential partnerships with different pharmaceutical companies for our vaccines. Since Hilleman Labs does not have its own manufacturing unit, we are looking to explore other suitable arrangements,” said Dr Davinder Gill, chief executive officer, Hilleman Laboratories.

Hilleman is presently developing vaccines to treat rotavirus, cholera and meningitis, with the rotavirus vaccine in the Phase I/II clinical trial stage.

Domestically, there are a handful of vaccine manufacturing companies including Bharat Biotech Ltd, Indian Immunologicals Ltd, Serum Institute of India, Panacea Biotec Ltd, GSK Pharmaceuticals Ltd, Bharat Serums and Vaccines Ltd, and Shantha Biotechnics Ltd, a wholly-owned subsidiary of French drugmaker Sanofi.

Since the company's primary focus is on developing countries, cost-effectiveness of the vaccines is one of the most important factors. A heat-stable rotavirus vaccine would eliminate the need for cold-storage facilities, driving down costs and partially removing logistical inefficiencies.

Sample this. "The Rotavirus Vaccine should be stored at -20°C at GMSDs (government medical stores depot), state, regional and district stores, in the walk-in freezers or deep freezers. Cold chain points below district level should store vaccine at +2°C to +8°C, in ice-lined refrigerators. Rotavirus vaccine should be transported in cold boxes with conditioned ice-packs..." dictates the operational guidelines for rotavirus vaccine under India's immunization programme.

Incidentally, the active ingredient for Hilleman's rotavirus vaccine is sourced from Merck.

"The partnership we seek for manufacturing vaccines will need to certainly be affordable and safe, which is our primary goal," said Gill.

Founded in 2009, MSD Pharmaceuticals and Wellcome Trust had invested about Rs.700 crore in the company.

The company, however, is looking at long-term prospects of profitability by licencing out their innovation to others which can market vaccines, and a consequent revenue stream through milestone-based royalties.

"We have no plans of setting up a manufacturing plant anytime soon. The road to profitability will take time—at least 3 to 4 years—so we are focusing on the priming our research pipeline along with leveraging our current research for revenues," said Gill.

Rotavirus, which causes severe diarrhoea, claims 80,000 children in India every year while nine lakh children seek hospitalisation.

On an average, at least 32.7 lakh severe diarrhoea cases are received in outpatient departments in India annually.