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Diverse and resilient supply chain significant for pharma industry: Experts

Shardul Nautiyal, Mumbai

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Experts in the industry have shared their experiences during Covid-19 pandemic while drawing attention towards the significance of diverse and resilient supply chain and the challenges posed by import-dependence of APIs during the lockdown.

The Government of India had announced the production linked incentive (PLI) scheme for APIs, KSMs/DIs and bulk drug parks in March 2020 to attain self-reliance and reduce import dependence in critical KSMs/APIs.

While sharing his views on the same, Sudarshan Jain, Secretary General, Indian Pharmaceutical Alliance said, "With the announcement of a nation-wide lockdown in India, the effective collaboration among key stakeholders including industry and government paved the way to address the challenges of the pandemic. Government collaborated with pharmaceutical organizations and industry experts to tread through the challenges of the pandemic. Active pharmaceutical ingredient (API)/key starting material (KSM) supply disruptions from single sourced countries was observed starting from February 2020 which highlighted the Indian pharma industry reliance on imports."

When the lockdown was first announced, in March 2020, the manufacturing volumes across plants decreased to less than 20 per cent of their original capacity. This was mainly due to reasons like restrictions on movement of persons/transport, workers returning to their hometown, shutting down of ancillary and related operations, forbidding workers to reach their places of work due to lockdown.

The industry experts and the government realized this very early and classified pharmaceutical manufacturing, distribution, ancillary and support operations as essential goods and services. By the end of May 2020, the manufacturing capacity rose to 70 to 80 per cent due to cooperation between the government, industry bodies and other industries.

"The industry responded to the Covid-19 challenges with swift solutions by assessing possible uses of the available drugs (repurpose drugs) and finding more innovative approaches. Indian pharma companies have taken a huge stride forward in developing indigenous vaccines. Vision 2030 can only be realized by the Indian pharma industry if they prioritize innovation. During the initial phase of the pandemic, the entities involved worked effectively and collaborated to bring effective medication and treatment options such as the antiviral remdesivir and favipiravir, mAbs medicine, and even older medicines such as the corticosteroid dexamethasone," Jain further explained.

Indian pharma companies collaborated to share best practices protocols for safety of employees in the manufacturing unit and formulated a code of conduct for the manufacturing employees when a person is reported as Covid-19 positive.

The objective of this protocol was to ensure the safety of the manufacturing and other personnel at the plant premises, minimize the risk and possibility of an outbreak within the plant premises and also ensure that patients across therapy areas are protected and ensured uninterrupted supplies through continued manufacturing operations without compromising personnel safety.

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) approved and endorsed the protocol and is being widely shared in the pharmaceutical sector to strengthen safety measures taken by the companies.

The key goal of the Indian pharmaceutical industry has always been to improve the access and availability of affordable medicines not just in India but across the globe. The Covid-19 immunization programme is making the role of the Indian pharma industry profoundly important. This is the appropriate time to move ahead of the short-term goals and focus on the long-term value chain adjustments. The aim should be to streamline the regulatory system in India that will improve the value of competition and enforce growth in quality and encourage innovation.

"The global pandemic poses an opportunity for India to truly become "Pharmacy of the World" and to realize its goals by reaching US\$ 120-130 billion, which will make India the largest volume producer in the world. The future will be defined by the way how collaborations with investments in R&D work out," Jain concluded.