

Fox challenges biotech biz

by Terri Somers

Swaying from the unrelenting progression of Parkinson's disease, actor and patient advocate Michael J. Fox challenged the biotechnology industry Monday at its massive annual convention: "Who's funding innovation today?"

Fox, who began a foundation to fund research into therapies for Parkinson's, criticized the industry for not placing enough emphasis on risk taking that he said could lead to therapies for 20,000 of the world's 30,000 identified diseases.

Not enough emphasis is being placed on the importance of translating basic scientific discoveries into new therapies, he said. For instance, the drug he takes is 40 years old. But the industry recently turned out a new antidepressant for dogs.

"My symptoms may not be getting better, but at least my dog feels better about it," he joked.

Fox is one of many celebrities, politicians and royalty scheduled to make appearances at the annual Biotechnology Industry Organization conference during its four-day run here. About 23,000 people are expected to attend.

During that time, there will be more than 200 panel discussions on topics such as biofuels, stem cell research and pandemic flu.

"This is the biggest biotech show in the world, with probably 40 percent of attendees coming from outside the U.S.," said Greg Lucier, chief executive of Invitrogen in Carlsbad, Calif.

"It's a nice mix of government types as well as private industry. So not only are we discussing cutting edge in science, but cutting-edge issues in regulatory matters," said Lucier, who will be co-chairman of the conference next year when it comes to San Diego.

While many Americans may not understand exactly what biotechnology is, recent polls commissioned by the industry show that the things it is supposed to do - find therapies for disease and products to help the environment - are foremost in people's minds.

Voters polled ranked finding cures to diseases as a top national issue, ahead of the war on terrorism, illegal immigration, global warming and education, according to surveys conducted jointly by Public Opinion Strategies and Peter D. Hart Research Associates.

The results, released Sunday, also showed that Americans as well as biotechnology executives who were polled were optimistic that cures to major diseases will be found within the next 10 to 15 years.

While the conference is all about the business of biotech, there's a theme of reaching out to underserved markets that don't generate big revenue.

There are panels focusing on how the industry can collaborate with international groups, such as the Gates Foundation and UNICEF, that work with underserved areas and neglected diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis, said James Greenwood, president of the Biotechnology Industry Organization, which hosts the conference.

Today, (May 8) Queen Noor of Jordan will talk about the role she thinks biotechnology should play in alleviating hunger and providing health care to underserved populations.

The attendees from more than 47 countries who cannot fit into the ballroom to hear Queen Noor can spend some of that time exploring the 200,000-square-foot exhibit hall at the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center or forging a new partnership or collaboration.

A two-story translucent and hollow globe stands sentry at one of the hall's entrances, beckoning to be explored. Those who walk inside can touch one of many screens, calling-up a short video explaining how some facet of the biotechnology industry has improved lives in a particular area of the world.

Just steps away are hundreds of exhibit booths, boosting countries, cities and companies from around the world.

Down one crowded aisle, Biogen Idec had erected a mini-version of the community labs it houses at its offices in San Diego and Cambridge, Mass., where students from each region are bused in to learn about drug discovery. Joe Panetta, president of the Southern California biotech group BioCom, and California Labor Secretary Victoria Bradshaw are among those scheduled to participate in the lab experiments.

Meanwhile, hundreds of executives scurried between prearranged meetings where collaborations, acquisitions and funding deals are worked out. This year more than 4,300 executives were scheduled for one-on-one meetings, Greenwood said.

Elsewhere in the convention center, foreign delegates and patient advocates held news conferences throughout the day, trying to tout development in their country or the need for investment into certain disease states. For a short time they have dozens of reporters from around the world trolling for stories that explain the complicated and diverse biotechnology industry to their readers.

While patient advocates have always lobbied the biotechnology and pharmaceutical industries, Fox is emblematic of the greater voice and role they now hold.

In the face of stagnant federal funding for basic scientific research, patient advocacy groups such as the Michael J. Fox Foundation are pouring millions of dollars into research through grants. Money never fails to pique the interest of cash-burning biotechnology companies.

And Fox talked about that Monday.

The industry spends about \$100 billion a year on drug discovery, he said, and that doesn't count the millions of dollars that patient advocacy groups contributed. And people this year will be asking for more, Fox said.

"But it's not about the money you spend, it's about spending the money more effectively," he said.

Fox suggested the industry rethink its definition of success and focus less on capital return and getting on the cover of Science or Nature magazines - and instead judge success by the effect on patients' lives.

Fox's words, delivered with his typical boyish charm, carried extra clout because his foundation gave \$7.5 million through seven grant programs to 16 companies.

Acknowledging that that amount of cash is small compared with what venture capital and others invest in drug development, Fox said his foundation aims to spend the money in the best possible way: helping take away some of the barriers or risks that prevent promising discoveries from moving down the long and expensive pipeline to commercial products.

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