Seeking more investment to create a world-class NHS

The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI) held its annual conference in April to launch its own General Election manifesto and present a wide variety of speakers from the NHS, industry, patient groups, academia and UK political parties. Joy Ogden reports on the organisation’s future industrial strategy.

“A ll that man needs for good health and healing can be found in nature: it is the job of science to find it.” So said Paracelsus, father of pharmacology, somewhere between 1493 and 1541, and scientists are still engaged in the search.

The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI) lined up an array of speakers at its annual conference in London in April to report on progress, launch its manifesto for the 2017 UK General Election extolling the virtues of a new Life Sciences Industrial Strategy, and to set out its pitch to the next government.

Introducing the conference with speakers from academia, patient groups, the NHS, plus one Conservative and one Labour politician, ABPI chief executive Mike Thompson said: “An industrial strategy is both necessary because of the complex set of issues that need aligning and critical because of the size of the prize.”

The life sciences sector invests £4bn a year in research and development – twice as much as the next nearest sector, he said. It supports almost half a million jobs and a life science company is based in every UK region.

He added: “At the centre of a Life Sciences Industrial Strategy, is the NHS. It stands to gain the most from its own virtuous circle provided that together we can unlock the potential of health data alongside improved patient access to new medicines. This would establish the NHS as a global centre for clinical trials, upskilling clinicians, providing patients with early access to innovation and delivering system efficiencies through free medicines and data, which in turn will show how to optimise patient pathways and deliver better outcomes.”

The ABPI’s General Election manifesto – Securing the Opportunity for UK
Life Sciences by 2022 – calls on the government elected on 8 June to set out a clear strategy to support and build up the UK’s status as a global hub for the pharmaceutical industry, and to improve patients’ access to medicines in line with other developed countries.

The UK spends a total of 9.9% of gross domestic product (GDP) on healthcare against a G7 average of 11.3%, which has left the UK second from bottom of the G7 nations in healthcare investment, with only Italy spending less. This must be corrected by injecting an extra £20bn a year into NHS funding to take it up to the average in leading industrialised nations, according to the ABPI.

Critics might accuse the pharmaceutical companies of profiteering, but Mike Thompson told Prescriber: “Most people who work in research never work on a medicine that comes to market in the whole of their lifetime. That’s how difficult it is for us to get new medicines to market. When we get something, it’s a really precious thing and that’s why we need to make sure patients get the most out of it as soon as possible.”

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From patient data to better medicines

Steve Bates, chief executive of the BioIndustry Association, first of the keynote speakers, talked about the importance of building biotech clusters. He illustrated their importance with a “trip round the UK”, which included the BioHub at Alderley Park, Cheshire, formerly AstraZeneca’s research and development facility, which now has over 150 companies employing more than 500 staff. He characterised it as cost effective and “a vibrant community of science professionals”, adding: “We think of the north-west as having some great locations if you’re a football fan... basically Alderley Park is the Wembley of life science locations.”

Ian McCubbin, outgoing chair, Medicines Manufacturing Industry Partnership (MMIP), in his presentation on Advanced Therapies and Complex Medicines manufacturing, said: “My greatest hope for the future of the industry is that we really pick up the life sciences strategy and learn to connect the whole ecosystem that exists in the UK. There is a fantastic opportunity to convert patient information into great medicines and to manufacture them in the UK to the benefit of the economy.”

Professor Daniel Ray, director of data science at NHS Digital, examined the role of digitalisation in UK industrial science; he explained the components vital to winning the race for usable data with some of the challenges to overcome in the face of an unprecedented explosion in clinical data over the last decade, which is set to grow ever bigger.

Key to success are: investment in improved technical infrastructure; building patients’ trust by being transparent about how their data will be used; ensuring data can flow easily, securely and officially into the right structured platforms to enable researchers to analyse it, without placing a burden on organisations.

Hosting the panel discussions, Jonathan Dimpley questioned Daniel Ray about the “hugely controversial” use of data collection within the NHS, especially sensitive when dealing with the individual’s own health status. Professor Ray agreed it was critically important to build patients’ trust in order to collect the data needed to deliver effective treatments and added that it meant communicating “where the data is housed, who has access to it, what it’s being used for, but also its value: their data – in a nonidentifiable form – can be analysed and will lead to much better treatments for their generation and the next generation.”

The politicians’ view

Chi Onwurah MP, Labour Party spokesperson for industrial strategy, opening the political debate, said that she spoke from experience of the sector, having worked as a chartered engineer in technology and science for 20 years before entering parliament.

She quoted economist Mariana Mazzucato, who said that “false choices between market and state” are counterproductive. She cited Labour’s record in doubling the science budget over its first 10 years in office, from £1.3bn in 1997 to £3.4bn in 2007, its introduction of research and development tax credits and the Higher Education Innovation Fund to improve links between academia and business, as evidence of her party’s commitment to investment in the life sciences sector.

She went on to criticise the Conservatives’ performance and emphasised the urgent need to bring UK investment in research and development back in line with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)
average or face the “risk of falling further behind competitors such as Germany and China.” She also slammed the government’s Brexit negotiations as damaging the ability of UK companies to access the best talent from across Europe and the world.

Greg Clark MP Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, set out the Conservative Party’s policies as outlined in its recently published green paper, Building our Industrial Strategy. Three challenges set out in the paper were to: recognise and build on the UK’s areas of excellence in science generally and life sciences in particular; give opportunities to some of the people and places missing out on the success levels of many in the sector’s cutting edge firms; and maintain a clear view that the UK must be entrepreneurs, scientists, researchers and innovators, and find straightforward ways to grow them and provide the right environment for them to succeed.

He recognised a failure to establish a level of prestige for technical education and qualifications taken for granted by universities, and his party is proposing to have technology institutes around the country to supply some of these technical skills and boost their standing.

He parried repeated questions from Jonathan Dimbleby and a member of the audience about the potentially damaging effect on the industries of the departure of the European Medicines Agency from the UK. He concluded by saying his party wanted to continue to have the best possible access without impediments to what is a very important market, which applied as much to pharmaceuticals as to other areas.

Bringing life sciences to the fore

Professor Sir Robert Lechler, president of the Academy of Medical Sciences, focused on the role of the UK’s science base.

He defined three things as important in helping the UK to seize its opportunity for life sciences: first, partnerships between universities, between academia and the NHS and with industry, where the cluster model is the way forward; second, the UK must work ever harder at ensuring it is internationally connected and convincing the world it is open for business; third, it must take interdisciplinary collaboration seriously if it wants to make important advances in medicine.

In response to Jonathan Dimbleby’s postlecture question about the impact of Brexit, Sir Robert said he thought it was “a spanner in the works” but it was important to look for opportunities in mitigation. With a high proportion of researchers and PhD students from continental Europe, it was important to have an agreement as early as possible in the negotiations that they have the right to remain, which must be reciprocal, he said.

He concluded by advocating pilot schemes of a “full monty version of integrating social, primary and secondary care... to make it a single system in a way that has been done in lots of places in the world, which have taken costs out and become more efficient.” He also talked about the possibility of putting together a leadership scheme designed to train people who can work across academia, industry and the NHS, thus equipping them to lead clusters.

Emlyn Samuel, Cancer Research UK senior policy manager, provided the patient’s perspective on making an industrial strategy work. His charity and patients are deeply concerned about the NICE budget impact test. “The potential for three years’ delay is unacceptable,” he said. “Some patients simply don’t have that much time.” Cancer Research UK wants to see the research base strengthened, better use of patient data and quicker introduction of innovations, and the UK should be ambitious about patient outcomes as well, he added.

Sir Andrew Dillon, chief executive of NICE, discussed the question of how to make the strategy work for the NHS but was constrained by purdah from making political statements in the run up to the General Election.

In response to a question on the budget impact test, he replied: “You can have drugs with low populations that are extraordinarily expensive as well as drugs for large populations that on an individual basis are relatively modest, so we always deal with them on a case by case basis. The opportunity for NHS England to apply for an extension, the conditions under which they can do that and the way in which NICE will evaluate it has been set

References