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Editorial

Innovation in the U.S. — Alive and Well

As I was sitting at the SCI's Chemical Industry Medal Award dinner last month, I was inspired by the words of Raj Gupta, chairman, president and CEO of Rohm and Haas Co., and recipient of the 2007 Chemical Industry Medal. At a time when many analysts say that innovation will not be a primary growth and value drive in the chemicals industry, Gupta paints a very different picture.

"Rapid globalization represents both numerous threats and numerous opportunities for the U.S. chemical industry — threats for those who ignore this inevitability, and opportunity for those who are prepared to embrace it and adapt proactively," said Gupta. He then quoted from U.S. managing editor of the *Financial Times*, Chrystia Freeland: "...we are at the start of a century that will be dominated by the rise of China and India. Yet, America's ability to innovate remains astonishing. This year's three most eye-catching technology companies — Google, My Space and YouTube — all come from a single small corner of the U.S." While these three examples are not related to the CPI, they are indicative of the American spirit. As Gupta put it, the U.S. will continue to be an innovation leader because of its ABC advantage. He explained:

A is for Attitude — Americans have a "can do" disposition; problems exist to be solved; obstacles create temporary inconvenience; innovation and experimentation are popular pastimes.

B is for Behavior — Flexible, curious, adaptable; in many ways, the genius of America is its willingness to abandon the norm and try something new with the least provocation.

C is for Culture — Americans assimilate immigrants better and faster than any other nation. We embrace diversity, while respecting the private space and rights of those who are different.

Also addressing innovation was Amgen's Roger Perlmutter in the keynote speech, "Conquering the Innovation Deficit in Drug Discovery," that he gave at the Society for Biological Engineering's (SBE) 1st Conference on Accelerating Biopharmaceutical Development (Mar. 19–22; Coronado Island, CA). So much of the mainstream media talks about the lack of blockbuster drugs in the pipeline, he observed. That's true enough. Although R&D investments have exponentially increased throughout the years, the number of successful therapies has remained fairly flat. It is clear that the industry cannot continue at this pace, but what should the industry do? Applying Gupta's ABCs, Perlmutter outlined a plan that thinks outside of the box. "To conquer the innovation deficit, we must advance different research priorities — focus on grievous illness (e.g., cancer); be prepared to exploit any treatment modality (e.g., proteins, small molecules, nucleic acids, cells); make studies of human disease a priority; and fully integrate preclinical and clinical evaluation."

Innovation is all around us. What sets the U.S. apart are the three intangibles that Gupta described. What also aids innovation is the development of new tools, such as computational fluid dynamics software discussed in this month's cover story (pp. 10–13). Given the right set of tools and the American spirit, the U.S. should stay at the top of the heap of innovation for many years to come.

Kristine Chin,
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