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Roche hunting for local partners

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Strong data, a high unmet clinical need and early-stage discussions are vital for biotechs wanting to partner with big pharma, a Roche deal-maker says.

Stella Xi, Executive Director for Roche Partnering Asia, visited Australia last week to attend AusBiotech 2010 in Melbourne. She says she came to Australia to make new connections, scope the overall landscape and have specific discussions about deals already initiated.

"We see great synergies between Roche and Australia's biotech industry. For example, its areas of strength in CNS and biologics match our strategic investments in these areas," Ms Xu said.

"Innovation is global, and we scour the world to look for the best science that will help us discover new treatments for disease," she said.

She says the quality of the Australian biotechnology industry is good despite being more early stage than the Bay Area or Boston. She says there is no universal rule as to what phase a drug needs to be in to be considered for partnering and says Roche does not focus any particular disease type.

"Our focus is science based and we focus on a certain treatment pathway. A mechanism might affect a number of indications so we will not, for example, focus only on breast cancer drugs," Ms Xu said.

"In oncology, we have 34 products in our innovation pipeline and internal teams working on specific targets. New drugs have to be either more advanced or have strong data to show that they work better.

"Also, in areas of high unmet need like inflammation, where there is lack of understanding of the biology, we are more open to early stage deals and are more flexible," she said.

Ms Xu says being first in class is important, as is strong data, and a compelling data package showing superiority over a competitor. She stresses biotechs should have international awareness and not just look at other players in Australia and drugs that will be sold in Australia. Many biotechs are resource poor so it is important to focus on elements of their pipeline that can create value, she says.

"The process of bringing new medicines to patients is risky and expensive. Small biotech firms depend on the expertise and resources of companies like Roche to make their breakthroughs a commercial reality.

"But it is not a one way street. We depend on their creativity and entrepreneurship to invest in innovations that could lead to new, life-saving treatments," Ms Xu said.

She urged biotechnology companies interested in partnering to contact Roche early, saying that, even before a data package is ready, Roche can help biotechs understand what to focus on and highlight which experiments are critical.

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