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Pioneering biotech work

Simon Carroll has dedicated his career to driving technological change in the biotech sector.

■ Roxanne Taylor

WITH a career that began with a Curtin University degree and a PhD and MBA at University of Western Australia, the business of science has taken Simon Carroll to the US and interstate.

Dr Carroll was awarded the 'chair's excellence award' last October at AusBiotech 2010 for his contribution to the biotechnology industry, a contribution he refers to as "one of great pleasure" and "intellectually challenging".

Dr Carroll fondly recalls starting the Margaret River Cheese Company after coming up with the idea with a friend in the early 1980s while sharing a bottle of red wine and a NSW cheese. Much research – before the convenience of Google – and many experiments later, the factory, which he also designed, was opened in Cowaramup.

"It was the thrill of making a product and using the biological process," he says.

Dr Carroll ventured to the US to study molecular biology as part of a post-doctoral fellowship from 1985 to 1988 when the structuring of genes was first being understood.

He returned to Australia, to Melbourne, and worked at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute, before joining AMRAD, one of the first biotech companies in Australia.

Dr Carroll was invited to work at the CSIRO in 1994 as commercial development manager, and recalls working at the time when flu drug Relenza was being developed.

During this time, Dr Carroll worked on drug delivery technology with FH Faulding & Co, one of Australia's early pharmaceutical and health companies. This led to him patenting a genetic transfer – a delivery technology that increases the efficiency of gene transfer used in treatments for combating diseases including cancer.

Dr Carroll says that, during the past 20 years, the focus has changed from delivering chemicals to delivering biological products and genetic material. Many pharmaceuti-

icals entering the market are being made as 'biological' agents, he says, including insulin protein, cancer-fighting antibodies and growth factors to stimulate white blood cells for recovery.

After almost a decade of industrial activity, and a host of companies starting up, it became clear an industry organisation was needed to educate the community and investors on the emerging field and ensure the laws were appropriate for development of not only the science and technology, but also the companies in the field.

This resulted in the establishment of AusBiotech in 2001.

Dr Carroll has been an active advocate for the industry on the AusBiotech board. He was the longest-serving member, spending 10 years in the role before moving on in August last year.

He says he saw the organisation grow from one employee to a team of 20, a budget increase from \$100,000 to \$6 million, while the organisation achieved its goal of being a recognised advocate within the industry.

During his time at AusBiotech, Dr Carroll worked with the ASX to put good practice in place for reporting on biotechnology so investors could better understand how companies reported on results, provided investors with information on the workings and language of biotechnology companies and built an annual conference circuit that up to 2,000 people attend.

Dr Carroll also established the Western Australian Biomedical Research Institute at Curtin and Murdoch for health research when he returned to Perth in 2001.

When looking back on his career, Dr Carroll says the highlight has been, "meeting and working with some really, really talented people who have driven technological change along the way."

Dr Carroll is now science expansion and partnerships manager at Scitech, where he is working to encourage broader youth and adult



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engagement with science.

He says with greater awareness, more people will embark on projects for the community, which in turn will lead to economic development of WA.

“If people are more familiar with things then they can more readily identify business opportunities in those areas,” Dr Carroll says.

“For us to be able to provide a strong economic future, we need to see more support into innovative industries, including biotechnology.”

He says the mining industry often receives the most attention in WA; it can often take as much time to bring a mine site to production as it does to bring a biotechnology product to production, but the difference is the sense of ownership for investors.

“When you have a mining tenement, you know exactly what you own,” he says.

“When you have a patent, which is for biotechnology, you have a good idea of what you own but it’s not as well defined and it’s always up for challenge under the intellectual property laws.”

The recipe for a healthy future in the indus-

try, according to Dr Carroll, is having tightly defined and protected intellectual property and being able to show investors that the risk-reward profile is calculated into their investment.

Dr Carroll is optimistic about the future of the biotechnology industry, with a proposed increase to the research and development tax incentive a welcome boost.

He says turning promising research findings into profitable businesses isn’t always easy, blaming global competition, technological advances and a variety of approaches to solving the same problem.

“However, unless you take those early steps of developing companies you’ll never test whether or not the technology will get to market,” Dr Carroll says.

He says universities are valuable for researching and developing technology, but companies are essential to ensure marketable products continue to be developed – products that provide new treatments for diseases, clean technology and agriculture production, and all stemming from the “incredibly important” biotech industry.

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Photo: Graff Carroll