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UCT to jointly host molecular farming workshop

The University of Cape Town's Biopharming Research Unit (BRU) and iBio Inc and will host a Molecular Farming Workshop in Franschhoek from 3-4 November 2017. The workshop will bring together public and private entities driving biologics production and human and animal healthcare in South Africa for the purpose of establishing a plant-based biopharmaceutical manufacturing capability in South Africa.

The expected output of the conference is a plan for the funding, technology transfer, facility construction and production of a pipeline of products specifically developed for the plant-made pharmaceutical platform. The conference will be co-chaired by Professor Ed Rybicki, Director of the BRU, and Dr Barry Holtz, President, iBio CDMO in Bryan, Texas.

The keynote speech will be delivered by Dr Gerald Parker, Associate Dean for Global One Health at the College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, Texas A & M University. Dr Parker recently chaired the 3rd Annual Global Pandemic Summit and is a world expert on global infectious disease. Dr Parker held senior executive level positions at the US Department of Homeland Security and the US Department of Defense, serving as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Chemical and Biological Defense.

UCT's BRU, led by Prof Rybicki, has developed a pipeline of protein-based reagents and biotherapeutic products using a transient plant expression system. Vaccine development efforts focus on human papillomaviruses, Rift Valley fever and Crimean-Congo haemorrhagic fever viruses, and animal vaccines including bluetongue virus and African horse sickness virus.

Professor Rybicki commented: "The BRU and others in South Africa have developed a pipeline of protein based biologics candidates using the plant-made platform that are relevant to the African continent and potential export markets. It is now necessary to bring experienced biotherapeutics manufacturing to South Africa to further develop these products, and we look forward to partnering with iBio to facilitate this."

iBio Inc, which intends to extend its empowerment business model to South Africa, is currently working with Biomanguinhos/Fiocruz to develop a plant-made biopharmaceutical platform in Brazil with a yellow fever virus subunit vaccine as the lead product. iBio will offer a complete empowerment package to a public-private partnership in South Africa that includes their proprietary expression system, early-stage product and process

development and design-build expertise to design and construct a facility in South Africa that mimics the iBio CDMO large-scale biopharmaceutical facility in Bryan, Texas.

iBio would then train the South African production team at their facility in Texas, and transfer the quality system for each new product. Dr Holtz stated that "to bring a manufacturing empowerment model to South Africa is the logical extension of our ongoing relationship with South African companies and universities, and our experience in Brazil."

The conference brings together leaders from public agencies, academic institutions, parastatals, private companies, regulators and private capital to map out concrete steps to establish the plant-based manufacturing platform in South Africa. The Department of Science and Technology (DST) leads a broad science and technology innovation effort including of advanced health care products to create socioeconomic opportunities. The Technology Innovation Agency (TIA) is an active funder of human and animal health care initiatives in South Africa. The Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) is a primary developer of manufacturing capacity and has important initiatives in biotechnology. Other participating agencies include the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), with its own molecular farming pipeline, and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI).

AzarGen Biotechnologies, a private South African biotechnology company, will be part of the private sector representation. AzarGen, primarily funded by the IDC, has worked with iBio for the last three years to develop biotherapeutics that include surfactin for infant respiratory distress syndrome and a biobetter rituximab for the treatment of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and certain autoimmune diseases.

The BioVac Institute and Onderstepoort Biologicals, manufacturers of human and animal vaccine products respectively, will also present. ENSafrica will speak to Intellectual Asset Management and Cape Venture Partners will overview the private capital opportunities in South Africa. Technology Innovation Group, a US based consulting group, will talk about the structure of successful public/private partnerships.

South African stakeholders such as the BRU and the CSIR will also describe their existing and proposed products, and their potential for changing the biopharmaceuticals landscape in South Africa.

The explicit goal of the conference is to develop an action plan that will result in a public-private sector sponsored biomanufacturing capability in South Africa that can move a focused and affordable pipeline of drugs forward to licensure for South Africa and the continent. The organisers are confident that the participants represent the critical mass needed to make this happen.

ENDS

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