

## EASTERN EUROPE

## BIOFORUM ŁÓDŹ

# Awakening the sleeping giant

Eastern Europe's premier biotech event made it back to its roots in Łódź this year. The very first Bioforum took place there in 2000, although subsequent meetings have been held in Budapest, Brno and other eastern European cities. On 28-29 May, about 300 industry executives used the 13<sup>th</sup> Bioforum to partner up, to attend a wide variety of discussions or to present themselves at the event's exhibition hall. A major topic this year was the region's competitive future in the life sciences. Are low labour costs enough to ensure success? Cracow-based Selvita S.A. shows that innovation might be the better route to take.



The Bioforum 2014 saw excellent attendance at keynote lectures

The Bioforum is the perfect venue for getting to know who is active in the region. Organisers Polish Bio-Tech Consulting Ltd. bill their event as "the biggest and most important biotechnology industry event in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)." However, although there were plenty of participants even from outside the EU in Łódź, it wasn't easy to find people from CEE countries – Poland excepted, of course. That aside, the event was managed professionally. The venue was excellent, presentation equipment was state-of-the-art, and the cuisine (though sadly not Eastern European) was tasty. Occasional hiccups with the schedule were also outweighed by a warm and welcoming atmosphere. To spice up the conference programme, Nobel laureate Ada Yonath, Burill & Co. CEO G. Steven Burrill and Teva Phar-

maceuticals VP Yafit Stark were brought to Poland to hold keynote speeches. Yonath, whose parents fled from Łódź to Jerusalem in 1933, gave an insightful talk about her work as a crystallographer, while Stark – who had been invited by Teva's Polish partner and Bioforum main sponsor KCR S.A. – underlined why she thinks the CEE region will continue to play an important role in the global CRO business. She noted that CEE boasts a large patient population that has not been extensively exposed to expensive new products. Recruiting is easier than in Western Europe, which speeds up the trials she said, while guidelines are followed and data quality is good.

Burrill set speed records trying to tear through 230 slides in 30 minutes. It was a futile attempt – but with a striking message:

"The healthcare system will undergo major transformations by 2015. With the advance of cheap, small health-monitoring devices, we will not be talking about patients anymore, but about consumers." He also speculated that with better metrics in hand, healthcare providers will be paid for the final outcomes their products and procedures score – not as they are today, based on effort and cost. Burrill also advised his Polish hosts to take advantage of the low cost of labour to focus on healthcare tourism.

## Pushing innovation

According to Krzysztof Rybinski, an economist and Rector at Warsaw's Vistula University, low-cost labour is a major asset in the Polish economy as a whole. But is having the cheapest workforce in Europe a matter for pride? In 2013 Poland fell behind Bulgaria and Romania in the Cornell/Insead/WIPO Global Innovation Index. "We are wasting money on infrastructure projects instead of using it to improve our innovativeness," Rybinski complained. Tadeusz Pietrucha agreed. The President of the Polish Biotech Association claims "just 10% of Polish life science companies are working on R&D projects to create new, innovative products." Asked by EUROBIOTECHNEWS how he would change the situation, Pietrucha demanded a more business-oriented way of selecting projects for funding. He thinks commercialisation potential – including IP situation, market potential and technological advances – should be evaluated early on. "But we also should intensify promoting a mindset centered on innovation. Today's scientists have to have different skills and attitudes than in the 20<sup>th</sup> century," he added.

That investing in R&D could be a path to success for Polish firms as well is nicely illustrated by Selvita. The drug developer received a first milestone payment in a collaboration with US partner H3 Biomedicine Inc. just a couple of days ahead of the event. Begun in 2013, the partnership is aimed at finding kinase inhibitors useful for treating cancer. Selvita CEO Paweł Przewieźlikowski therefore started his talk with a motivational metaphor: "Poland was a sleeping giant that has now turned to a sleepy giant. Let's continue waking him up!"