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GSK pitches to participate in the Universal Immunisation Programme

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PT JYOTHI DATTA
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British healthcare major GlaxoSmithKline is keen on participating in India's Universal Immunisation Programme, GSK top brass said, referring to recent proposals made by them to the Government.

There have been frequent conversations over several months with officials from the local and Beijing offices, Thomas Breuer, GlaxoSmithKline Plc's Chief Medical Officer (Vaccines) told *BusinessLine*.

"GSK and personally I am excited that the government wants to invest in prevention. Currently they are talking about the pneumococcal vaccine," he said, adding that more vaccines were on offer if the government wanted.

GSK operates in the pharmaceuticals, consumer products and vaccines segments and is presently the world's largest producer of vaccines by volume. Its rotavirus, pentavalent and cervical cancer vaccines are available in the Indian private market.

However, the multinational has not been majorly involved with the universal immunisation programme (UIP) for reasons varying from the government's requirements on particular products to the company's own capacity to supply.

With a strong footprint in India, Breuer says, "whether we do

more or not more will really depend on what will happen in India." Explaining further, he says, "India is - from a birth cohort or population point of view - such a big market. The latest move from the Modi government to invest in prevention, put vaccines which are already existing in the private market into a public setting is a good sign."

"We have offered our participation and if this is taken up then there is more space to do more in India. But it will depend on the kind of volume," he says.

GSK's pitch to get involved with the UIP comes against the backdrop of the World immunisation campaign this week where the World Health Organisation has urged countries to get more people vaccinated against illnesses.

Pricing strategy

Explaining GSK's strategy, Breuer said, the tiered pricing policy where medicines and vaccines are priced differently in different countries depending on their economic conditions has worked well to improve access to their products.

The price drops further in public markets if the commitment is for larger volumes or longer periods.

So vaccination of a large group of new-borns for a period of say two or five years will impact price, he said, adding, "this land of proposal has been made



Thomas Breuer, GSK, Chief Medical Officer (Vaccines) PAULNORONHA

to the Indian government for public vaccines like pneumococcal ... right now we are not a player as far as the rotavirus vaccine is concerned we have the volumes, so if the Indian government is interested we can (supply)."

GSK's India chief Annaswamy Vaidheesh added that they would participate in the Centre's next round of bids for rotavirus.

Safety concerns

Breuer feels that the cervical cancer vaccine too should be on the government's programme as it impacts the health of young women.

On safety concerns involving their cervical cancer and rotavirus vaccines, he said, that transparency, awareness and education were required to build public confidence.

GSK's vaccines operations got bigger in 2014 following a \$23-

billion asset swap with Novartis-GSK swapped its oncology business with Novartis' vaccine business.

In India, vaccines are under GSK Pharmaceuticals and the Novartis transaction was completed from April 1.

The integration brought about 140 people into GSK India besides products like the rabies vaccine and the meningitis portfolio among others.

In June, GSK will launch its MMRV vaccine (against measles, mumps, rubella and varicella), said Breuer, a strong promoter for combination vaccines.

"You don't see children in physician offices all the time, so the more vaccines you can give in one shot, the better it is. Next year, we will launch a hexavalent paediatric vaccine (protecting against six illnesses including polio, Hepatitis and Hib). This currently does not exist in an Indian market," he added.