

Advancing medicine through collaboration

In Wendi Yajnik's quest to find new technologies that could transform medicine, relationships are priority No. 1.

By [Elizabeth Dougherty](#) | Mar 05, 2020

Wendi Yajnik has been building partnerships between academia and industry for the better part of her career. When it comes to emerging technologies, she's seen it all – from cancer-fighting immunotherapies to gene editing tools to an approach to fat loss inspired by ice pops.

Now at Novartis, Yajnik heads Academic Partnerships and External Innovation for the Novartis Institutes for BioMedical Research (NIBR). Her team is responsible for bringing exciting new discoveries and technologies into Novartis from academia. Their efforts are helping drive NIBR's strategy to build an open framework for science in which academia and industry work more seamlessly to advance medicine.

Yajnik got her start as a molecular biologist at New York University Medical Center, in the US, where she studied the HIV virus during the AIDS crisis in the early 1990s. Her work helped answer fundamental questions about how the virus interacts with human cells.



As a biologist in the 1990s, Wendi Yajnik contributed fundamental science about how the HIV virus invades cells. Video by Stocktrek Images modified by Fidelis Onwubueke.

Early in her career, curiosity about how technology moves from idea to application led her to apply for a job in the technology licensing office at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts, in the US, just to get a sense of it. She ended up staying for 18 years.

During that time, Yajnik recalls, she attended a meeting where scientists revealed that they could freeze fat and flush it away. The research had stemmed from observations that kids who eat ice pops sometimes end up with dimples. The idea, backed by science, turned into a trendy new business.

"I love this field. I love the brilliance of the science and also making connections that help commercialize new ideas," says Yajnik.

Here she talks about her approach to academic partnerships and external innovation at Novartis.

Why is it important for industry and academia to work together?



Wendi Yajnik is building a worldwide network of relationships with academic institutions. Photo by Fidelis Onwubueke.

When I talk about why Novartis wants to team up with academia to find medicines for the worst diseases, I tell a story about a therapy for chronic myeloid leukemia that had its roots in academia but was transformed into a therapy through a collaboration with our scientists.

Before this therapy, patients diagnosed with a certain form of blood cancer might have lived a few years. After the therapy, they were living into their 70s and 80s.

That's why we want to do this. When discoveries from academia are developed into safe and effective approved therapies, we can transform people's lives completely. We need to do more of that.

Do you think there's a new type of medicine that might be found out there in a university laboratory?

Absolutely. Great technologies and early discoveries come from both industry and academia. Many of the discoveries and platforms that people are using to advance medicine came from academic institutions around the world.

Was it challenging switching gears from basic science to licensing?

I was able to learn more science in licensing than I did as an individual investigator. You get to see all the cutting-edge science before anybody else even knows about it. Plus I learned business skills, marketing and patent law.

Tell me about your Academic Partnerships and External Innovation team at NIBR.

It's a brand new organization. Our search and evaluation group is a team of scientists focused on finding and assessing new technologies coming from academia. Our research transactions team is dedicated to executing diverse collaborations with external partners, primarily academics.

We also have an educational component. We offer opportunities for students from grammar school to postdoctoral fellowship. Our discovery postdoctoral fellowships focus on training in fundamental science. We

also have a [new postdoctoral fellowship track aimed at training the next generation of drug hunters](#).

We're working on building a reputation for building relationships.

Wendi Yajnik

What is your strategy for identifying opportunities to collaborate with academia?

If we want to work with academia, we have to tell academia what we are interested in. So we've surveyed our scientific experts to understand what our research needs are. We take those needs and share them with researchers at academic institutions worldwide.

We've connected with institutions in Korea, Japan, Canada, Australia, England, Germany, and of course locations in the US and Switzerland. I really believe in building a network of institutions globally.

Are there other ways you are able to reach out to academics?

We've launched a NIBR Global Scholars Program this year. The program will fund a selection of academic investigators USD 1 million each for three years. Each investigator will be paired with a NIBR researcher to explore a particular project or topic. We're really excited to see what's out there and try to activate it.

Why are relationships central to your strategy?

We're working on building a reputation for building relationships. Having a face to the office is very important. If we build a good network, and we're responsive, our contacts will call us when they have something interesting. They'll share that new idea that we haven't thought of yet. That's the whole idea.

For example, last year I went to a research institute in Australia to do a roadshow. Later on, my contact there wrote to me because they had an interesting technology. Was I interested? They were so happy to have someone on our end to contact. I was able to go into our network at NIBR and see if there was an interest. We have to build that culture here, too, to be curious about what's out there.

Main image: Photo credit, Fidelis Onwubueke.

This story was updated in August 2020.

The Global Head of Academic Partnerships and External Innovation at NIBR discusses her approach.
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