

Head of a businesswoman, heart of a patient

By Chris Tachibana

Ruth Scott, who has been called "biotech's godmother", has advice for the life sciences industry

Ruth Scott has seen it all. She has been a promoter of biotech since its earliest days, and served as president of the Washington Biotechnology and Biomedical Association (WBBA) from 1998 to 2004, through the economic ups-and-downs of the dot-com era. She doubled both the membership and the budget of this industry-promoting organization during her tenure as its leader. On her retirement, the press called her "biotech's godmother". Now, Scott has a new perspective and a surprising new role. She considers herself a patient advocate. From this position, she offers some radical advice to the industry: get patients involved and bring them in early.

Patients + biotech + pharma = a powerful force

The seed of Scott's position was planted few years ago, when the US was considering policies to control prescription drug prices. Scott took a

panel of drug company executives to her state's capitol to speak to lawmakers on behalf of the industry. Immediately afterwards, a panel of patients spoke, and Scott was struck by the divide between the pharmaceutical companies and the patients. Patients demand access to life-saving drugs, says Scott, but do not understand that biotech firms and pharmaceutical companies are developing these products. This disconnect is not productive for either party, she says. Having patients and the life science industry on the same side could be a powerful force in drug development. Unfortunately, many patients view "big pharma" as the enemy, and don't trust biotech. Scott wants to correct this misunderstanding and bring patients and the industry together, and she has the background to be taken seriously by both sides. Professionally, she now works as a consultant, serving on the Advisory Boards of the National Arthritis Association and a company that is developing software for clinical testing. Before her work at the WBBA, she spent 17 years at the American Cancer Society. Personally, although she enjoys a semi-retirement that allows her time to travel,

Scott, like everyone, spends more time at the doctor's office as she gets older. With a head for business and a heart for patients, Scott is perfectly positioned to deliver the message of cooperation to both patients and the industry.

Participatory medicine: patients as partners

To the biotech and pharmaceutical fields, Scott urges "engaging patients at all levels", even at the earliest stages of drug discovery and development.

- The patient community must be part of this conversation. Seniors, for example, are uninformed and need to be brought in as partners with biotech, says Ruth Martin Scott. She advises connecting with future consumers through voluntary health agencies, like non-profit health groups, or disease foundations, like the arthritis group for which she consults. To patients, Scott echoes a message that is growing in the healthcare field: get involved, get educated, and act as your own advocate. The industry is also embracing the idea that patients are an active resource, rather than passive consumers. Lee Hood founded the Institute for Systems Biology in Seattle on the premise of "P4 medicine: personalized, predictive, preventive, and participatory". Participatory means that patients are involved in their own health care, and at Hood's company, research and development are driven by the P4 philosophy. Further down the pipeline, a potential benefit of consulting patients throughout the development process, is the effect on clinical trials. Life sciences companies may find that a large, informed population, with a long-term connection to a project, may be more willing to participate in clinical trials.

Although Scott fully understands the history between patient groups and the life sciences industry, she wants both sides to understand that, "in a healthy relationship, there will be disagreement, but also common ground and shared vision." She believes it will be "win-win" if patients are involved throughout the drug development. For patients, it means providing input and guidance to a process whose outcome may increase both the length and the quality of life. For those in the industry, Scott says that once patients are involved as partners, "they will become your best advocates."

The future of the industry: overall confidence

In general, Scott has a big picture view of the



life sciences industry these days, from her perspective as an observer rather than a participant. When asked her opinion on how biomedical and biotech will fare in the global economic downturn, she expresses concerns, but sounds confident overall.

- In a downcycle, the cream rises to the top. Biotech has matured -- there are not as many scientists working out of their garage. It now has seasoned executives that can move a company forward, if there is something promising in the pipeline, says Ruth Martin Scott.

She considers experienced management as the key to surviving the recession, and thinks companies will do well if they rely on “executives with successful track records and viable business plans”. When asked about specific areas with promise, she notes several trends from the 2008 State Bioscience Initiatives report, recently prepared for BIO, the Biotechnology Industry Organization. One is the explosion in Research, Medical and Testing labs, which could continue, with the interest in personal genome testing. Referring again to the State Bioscience Initiatives report, she sees great potential in the field of Agricultural Biotechnology, pointing to the US state of Illinois. This midwestern state has reaped the benefits of generous local and national funding, targeted educational programs and state technology transfer initiatives, to become one of the leaders in not only Agricultural Biotechnology, but also in the areas of Drugs and Pharmaceuticals, and Medical Devices and Equipment. Finally, as an Advisory Board member for a company designing software for clinical trial management, she has personally noticed increases in demand for Contract Research Organizations (CROs). CROs are increasingly where clinical trials are conducted, and Scott sees them as a growth industry. In any case, Scott is not negative about the life sciences industry in this difficult market, just realistic. Although times will be tough, she says, “there will always be survivors”.