

Biotech sector going through 'resurgence'

By medical reporter [Sophie Scott](#)

Biotechnology Industry

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Unidentified researcher working in a laboratory at the Canberra University. Taken: November 2011 (ABC News)

There is a renewed focus on Australia's biotech sector as other parts of the economy struggle to survive.

With manufacturing in the doldrums and car makers having to shed staff, Australia's expertise in medical and scientific research is coming to the fore.

One biotech company is finding success with its new technology which could fundamentally change the treatment of many common diseases.

Benitec says it has developed a new way to permanently shut down genes associated with a range of illnesses.

Scientific advisor Doctor Mick Graham says they have a platform technology that is a new way of thinking about developing drugs.

"Conventional drugs target proteins and often inactivate those. Our strategy is to go a step up and degrade RNA's that are associated with the production of that protein," he said.

It has taken almost 15 years of work, but they are about to start clinical trials using the approach for patients with hepatitis C later this year.

Also in the pipeline are trials for chronic pain and drug resistant lung cancer.

While it sounds promising, in the past, the Australian biotech sector has not always delivered.

"There's been some spectacular successes in Australian biotechnology," Benitec chief executive Doctor Peter French said.

"Mesoblast, CSL, Cochlear, Resmed and some smaller companies have done well. But other companies have had their challenges.

"It's really a matter for investors to choose companies that they feel can make a difference."

Biotech 'resurgence'

Researchers say there is a renewed interest in the biotechnology sector.

"It's quite cyclical in biotech. People now are talking about another biotech boom occurring," Dr Graham said.

Doctor Peter French agrees.

"There is certainly a resurgence in biotech following some of the less spectacular results in other sectors," he said.

But it is a high risk area and sometimes even the most robust research does not always make it from the bench to the bedside.

You need all the planets in alignment to take a good discovery thru to a drug that can actually treat a particular disorder.

Professor Nick Heywood from the Queensland Institute of Medical Research says there is a lot of research that does not get taken up to the translational area where it gets put into a clinic.

"This is for a lot of different reasons. It could be failure to identify a good drug or its markers or it could be due to lack of investment," he said.

"You need all the planets in alignment to take a good discovery thru to a drug that can actually treat a particular disorder."

Medical research is currently under the spotlight with the Federal Government releasing a major review into the sector.

The review found that the sector has grown rapidly in last decade, with pharmaceuticals and medicines now Australia's largest manufacturing export.

Spending on medical and scientific research in Australia is estimated to be in the range of \$6 billion and that means biotech companies will continue to hope they can find the answers to important medical problems.

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