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OUR AFFILIATES

OPINION

Wednesday, January 17, 2007

Bush recognizes social entrepreneurship

By BILL SHORE
GUEST COLUMNIST

Like many such events, the recent White House Summit on malaria, which featured a speech and new grant announcements by Melinda Gates, was carefully choreographed with few surprises. But there was one.

President Bush began the closing keynote address by saying, "I want to thank those members of my Cabinet who are here, the ambassadors, the members of Congress, and I want to thank the social entrepreneurs who are with us today." Bush then cited the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as "a fantastic example of social entrepreneurship, using business acumen to address social problems."

It is rare for presidents to speak of social entrepreneurship. The concept of adapting free-market incentives and entrepreneurial business disciplines to increase the scale of effective social services has gained great currency in the non-profit sector but remains mostly unknown beyond it.

The enormous size and breadth of the grants made possible by the combined assets of Bill Gates and Warren Buffett tends to obscure the fact that the greatest impact and legacy of the Gates Foundation may not be in how much they spend, but in how the dollars are spent, especially to encourage the kind of social entrepreneurship of which Bush spoke.

Take two recent examples of Gates grants addressing inequities in global health. Both are aimed at malaria, which kills more than 1 million children a year. Both invest in for-profit companies dedicated to scaling up solutions that have already been proven to work.

- A grant of nearly \$43 million supports the efforts of Jay Keasling, a chemical engineer at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, who is inventing an affordable way to manufacture artemisinin, the only drug reliably effective in curing malaria. Because artemisinin is rare and expensive to extract from plants that grow in China and Vietnam, Keasling injected artemisinin genes into yeast and E.coli, enabling the rapidly reproducing microbes themselves to become chemical factories yielding the miracle drug in beakers and flasks.

Efficient, cheap and clean, such production could radically drop the price of this desperately needed medicine. Keasling's work is not aimed at developing a cure for malaria. That cure -- artemisinin -- already exists. Keasling's work is aimed at developing a 25-cents-a-dose cure, which is 10 percent of the \$2.50 a dose the drugs' scarcity commands today.

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- Steve Hoffman, who received \$29.3 million at the White House Summit, is working to commercially develop a vaccine discovered nearly 40 years ago but never manufactured. That's because it is based on the laborious task of dissecting the salivary glands of mosquitoes to extract parasites weakened by radiation, a procedure widely considered impractical.

But after decades of watching every other vaccine attempt fail, Hoffman realized that the challenge is not one of scientific discovery but of biotech engineering. The lab he is building will enable him to culture and harvest quantities of parasites sufficient to meet the developing world's need for a potent, sterile and stable malaria vaccine.

The goal of these Gates grantees is to create a medicine and a market. Hoffman envisions a business model for the vaccine built on travelers and the military. Venture capital firms such as Kleiner Perkins and Khosla Ventures recently have put \$20 million into the biotech company Keasling created because they believe his proprietary synthetic biology technology also could produce flavors, fragrances and even fuels.

Who better than the Silicon Valley venture capitalists who guided the growth of Amazon.com and Google, which after all, are imaginative deployments of technology to more efficiently and inexpensively deliver already existing products to those who want them? That is exactly what is needed in the case of medicines and vaccines for malaria and other tropical diseases.

That is why social entrepreneurship got the attention of the president as well as philanthropists.

Bill Shore is founder and executive director of the anti-hunger organization Share Our Strength.

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