



Japanese executives ponder investing in Mass.



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Members of the Japanese delegation, including Yasushi Okubo, founder and CEO of Corescope (at left), at Parexel.

By [Jonathan Saltzman](#)

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They visited a giant laboratory in Cambridge shared by emerging biotech companies and walked the life sciences mecca that is Kendall Square. They met with government officials who want to lure foreign companies to

Massachusetts. They even saw the New England Patriots lose the Super Bowl on a hotel TV screen as fans around them groaned in disgust.

A dozen leaders from six small Japanese biotechs from Kyoto, along with officials from a Japanese government trade organization, toured Boston, Cambridge, and nearby suburbs last week to get a feel for the place. They wanted to know whether the state would be fertile territory for their businesses to expand, whether they would have access to patients for clinical trials of drugs, and whether Massachusetts companies might eventually want to collaborate with them on business ventures.

The answers seemed to be yes, if the reaction of one of the visitors was any gauge.

“To me, it’s one of the most attractive places in the US,” said Dr. Yasumichi Hitoshi, chief executive of Thyas Co. Ltd., a Japanese biotech startup experimenting with immunotherapy to treat cancers and infectious diseases. “There’s a lot of venture capital. And I learned that everything’s in walking distance.”

As part of their visit, the Japanese business leaders last week toured Parexel International Corp., a large Waltham company that performs clinical trials for many drug companies. Parexel has 18,000 employees worldwide, including 3,000 in Massachusetts.

Alberto Grignolo, corporate vice president of Parexel, worked from 2011 to 2013 in Japan because his company has offices in Tokyo, Osaka, and Kobe. He helped arrange the visit.

Japanese drug makers, like many in Europe, have already set up some operations in Massachusetts, home to the world’s largest cluster of life science and biotech companies.

In 2008, Takeda Pharmaceutical Co. bought Cambridge-based Millennium Pharmaceuticals, one of the state's best-known biotechnology companies, for \$8.8 billion. Millennium, renamed Takeda Oncology, has become the cancer-fighting division of the giant Japanese drug maker.

A year later, Japan's Sumitomo Dainippon Pharma bought Sepracor Inc., of Marlborough, which was renamed Sunovion Pharmaceuticals Inc. It makes medicines to treat chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, which affects more than 15 million Americans.

Several economic factors in Japan are spurring more companies to look abroad, according to Grignolo. Japan has a low birth rate, universal health care, generally risk-adverse venture capitalists, and a government that increasingly is pressuring drug makers to limit or cut prices of blockbuster medicines.

Some of those trends may help explain why Japan has one of the world's longest healthy life expectancy rates, but they don't necessarily make the country the most hospitable place for startup biotech companies.

"The message from the government to companies is go global, which in this case probably means find US partners," Grignolo said.

Several of the leaders of the Japanese biotechs and the Japan External Trade Organization, which also sent representatives on the trip, said one of the most appealing things about the life sciences sector in Massachusetts is the presence of world-famous teaching hospitals.

Patients undergoing treatment for serious diseases at those hospitals are often eager to participate in clinical trials of experimental drugs, as are their doctors, the visiting executives said.

“I want the physician or [primary investigator] to get really excited about the product we make and run clinical trials with passion,” said Hitoshi, of Thyas.

The Japanese contingent also met with officials from the administration of Governor Charlie Baker, Boston Mayor Martin J. Walsh’s office, the Massachusetts Biotechnology Council, and LabCentral Inc., a Cambridge nonprofit that runs shared laboratory space for biotech startups.

The business leaders visited New York after leaving Boston.

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