

Devolved drug discovery – the story continues

In this month's invited Editorial, Dr David Cavalla of the Napp Research Centre in Cambridge, UK, explores the concept of outsourcing research in drug discovery. An excellent example of this type of collaboration is the recent initiation of the Cruciform Project – The Institute for Strategic Medical Research – in London. The Cruciform Project has been established at University College London (UCL) under the auspices of Prof. Salvador Moncada, formerly Director of Research at Wellcome (Beckenham, UK). Initially based at the UCL Rayne Laboratories, the Project will eventually be housed in the Cruciform Building, originally the University College Hospital.

This opening of the Cruciform Building is anticipated in 1998. The purchase and refurbishment of the Cruciform Building is likely to cost some £45 million, but funding from a range of sources means that 60% of the necessary resources are already committed. When finally opened, part of the building will be used for teaching purposes.

On 22 January, Ian Taylor MP, UK Minister for Science and Technology, opened the first phase of the project, the opening of its laboratories. He said, "the Cruciform Project will establish a world centre of excellence in drug discovery research". The centre will represent an academic institute that coordinates research in a strategic way. As an organization aimed at solving problems directly related to human diseases, Prof. Moncada anticipates that the Institute should be attractive to funding bodies such as medical charities, research councils and government bodies. Commercial research collaborations are actively being sought – the emphasis will be on the identification of new drug candidates that can be taken into development by pharmaceutical companies. He believes that the industry is seeking such alliances in order to streamline their in-house discovery programmes; an outside organization has the time and flexibility to do the job properly. He also believes that the Institute can



Opening of the first phase of the Cruciform Project. From left to right: Lord Young of Grafham, Professor Salvador Moncada, Ian Taylor MP and Sir Derek Roberts (Provost, UCL).

offer more than can be expected from a 'boutique' company – the experience of his team means that it will be possible to carry a project through from the original concept to testing in humans.

Some £10 million has already been contributed by GlaxoWellcome to support basic research programmes at the Institute together with a commercial programme in nitric oxide research, a field in which Moncada's group has considerable expertise. According to Dr Allan Baxter, GlaxoWellcome Research Director, "At our Stevenage Medicines Research Centre we have some 20 scientists already working on inhibitors of nitric oxide synthesizing enzymes. By working together, we increase the probability of finding novel, therapeutic indications for inhibitors of this important biological system."

The team of 50 scientists currently involved includes molecular biologists,

medicinal chemists, pharmacologists and clinical investigators. The senior scientists on the team include Prof. John Martin (King's College School of Medicine) and Prof. Patrick Vallance (St George's Medical School) who will lead cardiovascular and clinical research, and Prof. John Garthwaite and Prof. Ken Powell, both from Wellcome, who will lead CNS research and cell biology respectively. It is expected that staffing will reach 100 by the time of the move to the Cruciform Building and will then double in the following few years. Prof. Moncada believes that the Institute offers an attractive prospect for researchers who do not want to work in larger corporate environments but seek a greater level of professionalism than is often found in academia.

David Hughes