

## Grist to the 'Mill'

One of the most intriguing web sites for readers of *Drug Discovery Today* must surely be the Biotech Rumor Mill (<http://www.tradesmart.com/rumor>). Although the site was launched only in early 1996, 4,000–5,000 different individuals visit the site each month (approximately 100,000 'hits' in total) and more than 800 users now subscribe (free of charge) to the e-mail update service that delivers recent additions to the anonymous posting on a weekly basis. Current Rumor Mill sponsors are SearchMasters International (Sedona, AZ, USA), Research Diagnostics Inc. (Flanders, NJ, USA) and Whatman Polyfiltronics (Rockland, MA, USA).

The Rumor Mill provides a forum for information exchange regarding all aspects of drug discovery, diagnostics and biotechnology. Postings relate to emerging technologies, anticipated success or failure of pipeline drugs, speculation on impending mergers, company closure or restructuring and many other rumour-worthy subjects. For those posting information on the site, strict anonymity is maintained. An early coup was 'getting the drop' on the merger of Ciba and Sandoz to form Novartis earlier this year, four days before the public announcement. Mention of the Pharmacia-Upjohn merger was also made before the actual event. Some of the most entertaining material is provided by the on-going dialogue and wrangling between regular contributors, with pseudonyms such as 'Anonymous Rat', 'Sailor' and 'Dirtbag'. The messages posted indicate a wide range of contributor types with diverse motivations, but the content of certain postings suggests that some contributors do occupy senior industrial positions. A 'quick-and-dirty' poll of site visitors carried out in September 1996 revealed that the largest group of site visitors were 'industrial scientists' (36%) and the second largest group was 'corporate management' (19%).

### Rumor Mill Webmaster

The Webmaster for the site is Martin Leach, a molecular pharmacologist who is currently completing his doctoral studies

on the GABA<sub>A</sub>/benzodiazepine receptor complex at the Department of Pharmacology of Boston University, before taking up a post as Research Scientist in Bioinformatics at Curagen (Branford, CT, USA), a frontier company in the development of genomic tools. In fact, he reached the attention of Curagen's CEO through his involvement with the Rumor Mill.

Leach is an Englishman in exile, having lived in Boston for the past six years. He is a self-confessed 'web-head', and has provided expertise in designing corporate web sites, including work for divisions of Amersham International and Boehringer Mannheim. He initiated the Rumor Mill after selling on his previous project, the Biotech Company Directory to Biological Data Transport (Danville, CA, USA). According to Leach, "I was looking for something more challenging, and came up with the idea of a site where the sort of gossip that currently goes on at research symposia and analysts' meetings could be aired without fear of recrimination – who wouldn't want to read that?"

### Sensitive issues

By its very nature, the Mill attracts the interest of those who follow stocks or who wish to promote stocks. The site has attracted the interest of the US watchdogs, the Federal Trade Commission and the Stock Exchange Commission. Most companies have adopted a tolerant approach to the site, accepting that the Rumor Mill offers just that, rumour. He does however try to preempt difficult situations by liaising closely with the industry, "If I consider a posting to be controversial, I always notify the public relations and legal departments of the companies concerned on posting the item". Nevertheless, there have been occasional attempts at intervention to defend corporate face, which Leach regards as having been counterproductive for the companies involved. There was also one instance where a company employee posted an item 'anonymously' and then included their e-mail address with the posting – they nearly lost their job. He believes that his role as moderator should



*Martin Leach – Webmaster*

be a minimalist one, given the subject matter. He does, however, delete deliberately insulting postings and bad language out of hand. "It's no contribution to intelligent debate and it's not in the spirit of the site" he says, "Who needs it?"

### The future

What next for the Rumor Mill? Leach is determined that the Mill will continue after his move to Curagen, but in fairness both to the Mill and his new company, he expects to hand over the reigns to a new moderator in the course of 1997. With the growing number of contributions, it may also become necessary for the Rumor Mill to be divided according to subcategories in order to keep the volume of dialogue manageable. Unfortunately for Leach, commercialization does not appear to be an option "Contributors do so for free" says Leach, "To charge for access would diminish the real value of the site".

In 1997, Martin Leach will be contributing a column to the pages of *Drug Discovery Today* focusing on key issues in bioinformatics and hot issues on the Internet. He aims not only to explore emerging technology and information platforms, but also to look 'down the track' to help us discern the future realities from science fiction.

In the meantime, check out the Mill.

*David Hughes*