## **CAREERS AND RECRUITMENT**



## Limited opportunity

Japan's Brain Science Institute offers young neuroscientists jobs — but doesn't guarantee them long-term employment, says Robert Triendl.

he Brain Science Institute (BSI) at RIKEN, Japan's Institute of Physical and Chemical Research, is a magnet for young Japanese neuroscientists. But some young neuroscientists worry that the emphasis on limited-term contracts at the BSI does not provide them with long-term stability.

Founded in 1997, the BSI is the first Japanese neuroscience research institute dedicated exclusively to basic science. It employs 600 researchers in 35 research laboratories that span all fields of neuroscience. Located at RIKEN's Wako campus, some 30 minutes from central Tokyo, the BSI offers working conditions and funding opportunities that far exceed what scientists can expect in Japan's academic environment.

But Japan's finance ministry has kept tight control on the creation of any new faculty positions at Japan's

A community takes root

By US standards, Japan's neuroscience community is still in its infancy. The Japanese Neuroscience Society has only a few thousand members and, despite much recent growth, its annual meetings have preserved a certain intimacy.

The first dedicated research centres, such as the National Institute of Neuroscience in Tokyo, were conceived mostly as research services to hospitals or medical facilities. Other

institutions, such as the Mitsubishi Kasei Institute of Life Sciences, the first large-scale lifesciences research centre in Japan's private sector, have also provided institutional niches for research in molecular neuroscience. Set up in 1971 by Mitsubishi Chemical, the institute was conceived as a longterm contribution to the development of life sciences in Japan, rather than as a corporate research unit. R.T.

national research institutes or universities — which means that all scientists at the BSI have a five-year contract that, in principle, is not renewable. Scientists who have not been promoted to the position of group leader during the five years have to leave the institute.

Limited-term positions are especially problematic for female scientists. Although more female researchers are joining the BSI, there are virtually no female group leaders. Women scientists in Japan have generally had a difficult time rising to top positions (see Nature 410, 404-406; 2001). Nevertheless, some women at the BSI say they prefer the short-term contract there compared with the difficulty they face getting a permanent university position.

Masao Ito, director of the institute, which he helped to establish, defends the limitedterm policy, arguing that it is meant "to increase the mobility of young researchers". But as the pool of established neuroscience researchers in Japan is fairly small, the BSI faces increasing competition for senior faculty from large national universities.

Earlier this year, an international advisory panel urged the BSI to consider setting up a number of long-term faculty appointments to ensure that the institute keeps the most successful scientists. As universities gain more independence from central government over the next few years, competition for successful faculty will only increase.

The BSI's attempts to negotiate a more equal distribution of tenured positions with RIKEN's various institute laboratories have so far yielded little success. All of the 650 tenured positions at RIKEN are held by scientists in traditional institutes, rather than newer set-ups such as the BSI.

The BSI's emphasis on limited-term contracts is intertwined with its history, which goes back to the 'frontier research system' — a special research-funding scheme set-up by the government and RIKEN in the mid-1980s. The well-funded programme was meant to attract foreign scientists for temporary periods. Ito took over the directorship of that programme, and used it as a basis to expand neuroscience research and to launch the BSI. Many of the neuroscience laboratories established within the frontier programme later moved into the adjacent new building of the BSI located at the same campus. But finding a way to overcome that history, by allowing some tenured positions within the BSI, may well give the institute — or at least the scientists working in it — a brighter future. Robert Triendl is a freelance writer based in Tokyo.

## Web links

Brain Science Institute www.brain.riken.go.jp National Institute of Neuroscience www.ncnp.go.jp/nin Mitsubishi Institute of Life Sciences www.m-kagaku.co.jp/english/aboutmcc/RD/relation/life.htm Neuroscience Research Institute unit.aist.go.jp/neurosci/english/english.htm Tokyo Metropolitan Institute for Neuroscience www1.sphere.ne.jp/tmin