

# Kerry Sieh

Earthquake geologist **Kerry Sieh** of the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena is moving to Singapore in July to head the new S\$300 million (US\$220 million) Earth Observatory of Singapore. He talks to David Cyranoski.



investigators and about 50 graduate students and 20 postdocs. Eventually I hope to have an undergraduate programme as well.

## How is Singapore's Earth science scene?

There currently isn't one. Between 25° N at Taipei and 35° S at the Australian National University in Canberra, there are no well-funded Earth research centres. We will have to create it, just as Berkeley and Stanford had to back at the end of the nineteenth century. But there are Earth scientists in other countries in the region. They just aren't very well funded. We are already talking to our Japanese and Taiwanese colleagues, for example.

## Did former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew's statement: "no public purpose is served by interfering in [gay people's] private lives" influence your decision to go?

Yes, Yew weighed in on the issue while I was there last year. It was quite reassuring. There is a ban on homosexual sex. I'm not a political type, but I'm also not a sycophant. I decided to leave my acceptance speech for the gay scientist of the year award on my homepage, although I knew that Singapore might have issues with it. I don't want to be a poster boy for the Singapore gay community, but I wouldn't have gone if I couldn't bring my partner. ■

## Why did you decide to move to Asia?

There are many, many interesting questions regarding Earth processes related to natural hazards in the region — the biggest ones are tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanism, sea-level rise and climate change. Most of these questions are not being addressed there, because of sparse funding regionally and thin ranks of academic researchers. The longer I have worked in the region, the more I have enjoyed it and the more aware I have become of the need for doing basic Earth science aimed at improving civilization's chances for survival. Singapore's government was very receptive to this big idea.

## Singapore is not known for volcanoes, tsunamis or earthquakes, though.

Many of Singapore's neighbours are exposed to these natural processes, and its economic and political health is very much influenced

by the state of its neighbours. Singapore could get covered in 20 centimetres of ash from an Indonesian volcanic eruption. And Singapore will certainly be exposed to the effects of climate change.

## What are your plans for the institute?

I am in my mid-50s now, and I have developed some grand visions about science — I have always wanted to see the impact of science on people's lives. We're proposing to do basic science to assess danger. If you want to know the risk facing an area on a fault, you need to know whether there might be a magnitude 9 earthquake or whether it's more likely to be a flurry of 8s.

## Who have you recruited so far?

Paul Tapponnier will lead the tectonics group and Chris Newhall will lead the volcanology group. There will be 20 principal

# Merck accused of disguising its role in research

International drug giant Merck stands accused this week of manipulating research papers on one of its products published in medical journals.

Thousands of documents relating to Merck's withdrawn painkiller rofecoxib (Vioxx) were made available as part of a legal action. They were reviewed by medical researchers paid by the litigants in the trial, which ended in 2006, and seem to show Merck's extensive involvement in ghost-writing and 'guest authorship' of research and review papers. The results of the analysis are published this week in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*.

By omitting the names — or downgrading the involvement — of drug-industry writers, and adding the names of academics who were not substantially involved in a paper, the industry's

role in research may be concealed. And doctors may be misled over the independence of the work.

"The idea of a company conducting a clinical trial, having its employees design the trial, analyse the data, write the paper, and then towards the very end recruit academic authors to put their name on the paper to give it that seal of supposed authenticity is very wrong," says Joseph Ross, a doctor at Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York, and one of those behind the analysis (*J. S. Ross et al. JAMA* **299**, 1800–1812; 2008).

Ross and his colleagues closely scrutinized 250 documents released by Merck during the case relating to rofecoxib and say there are some strong suggestions of ghost-writing. For example, one of the Merck-held documents lists a number of clinical trials in which a Merck employee is

to be author of the first draft of a manuscript. However, when these trials were published, in 16 of 20 of the articles an external academic is listed as first author.

Where Ross's team was able to identify manuscript drafts before and after leaving Merck, they found "scant documentary evidence" that authors subsequently named on studies were actually involved. A pattern of "inappropriately attributing authorship to academic authors and a failure to disclose relevant financial relations" emerges from the Merck documents, they say.

Another article based on documents from a separate court case reports "striking" disparities between mortality results for the drug in published papers and those contained in Merck's internal analyses (*B. M. Psaty and R. A. Kronmal JAMA* **299**, 1813–1817; 2008).

Taken together, say two of *JAMA's* editors, these papers show that Merck "apparently manipulated dozens of publications to promote one of its products".

Merck rejects the allegations of manipulation and misrepresentation and denies that the documents show any wrongdoing. Jim Fitzpatrick, a partner at Merck's external counsel Hughes Hubbard & Reed in New York, says, "These are allegations that were made by these particular authors who acted as experts for the plaintiffs in the Vioxx litigation, and during the course of that litigation Merck responded to all those allegations. Quite frankly, we think that a lot of the conclusions and statements in the articles are either outright incorrect or really misleading because they lack any context surrounding them." ■

**Daniel Cressey**