

## Stanford donation funds transdisciplinary center

Cross-disciplinary biomedical research at Stanford University will benefit from a \$150 million gift by Jim Clark, a former engineering professor at the university who went on to start Netscape, Silicon Graphics and other companies. With 50 faculty, 400 students and a 20,700-m<sup>2</sup> building, the new Clark Center will be a mid-range privately funded biomedical research institute, equal in size to San Diego's Salk Institute and somewhat larger than the Whitehead Institute at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The center aims to foster collaborations between basic, applied and clinical sciences. Stanford has taken a lead on this with its Institute of Biomedical Engineering, which merges traditionally separate disciplines such as engineering and radiology to approach tasks like simulating the physiology of a knee joint, or calculating blood flow patterns to show how the vasculature is affected by shunts.

The center's programs are all based on the premise that it is no longer possible to think about biomedicine without computation. As industry continues to drain off talent from academia faster than it can be replaced, "we'd like to double the number of people at Stanford who want to make biocomputation a key part of their work," says Russ Altman, who directs a Stanford informatics program.

The largest part of the center, "Bio-X," will be a more diffuse—hence the variable embedded in its name—aggregation of disciplines, according to its biochemist director, Jim Spudich. 'Neuroinformatics', for example, with its heavy imaging component, requires talent from medicine, cognitive psychology, molecular biology, physics and computer science.

Unlike Harvard or Berkeley, Stanford has no Charles River or San Francisco Bay separating its main campus from its medical school, but Campus Drive, a main thoroughfare that bisects the campus, has historically separated medicine from academic departments. The Clark building will bridge Stanford's 'moat' both physically and intellectually. "It makes enormous sense to have this building as a unifier," says Mike Levitt, chair of Structural Biology. "Clark's initial investment of \$150 million will produce value in the billions," he predicts.

**Potter Wickware, San Francisco**

## Poor attendance bankrupts conference

Biomedical researchers keen to commercialize their discoveries were left stranded last month when the APEC Technomart III conference and trade fair in Australia closed shop after only two of its scheduled six days. APEC economies, including the US, The People's Republic of China, Chinese Taipei, Russia, Japan, New Zealand and Indonesia, were expected to generate 30,000 visits to 11 conference venues, but fewer than 3,000 people turned up, sending the operating company, PacRim Technomart, into liquidation.

On day one, the director of Melbourne's Baker Medical Research Institute, John Funder, told visitors that the Australian government was "scientifically and technologically illiterate" in failing to move fast enough to cash in on the biotech revolution. By day two, exhibitors, who had paid up to AUS\$30,000 (US\$19,000) for their displays, were inclined to agree, and some speakers were addressing audiences of fewer than ten people. On day three, some of Australia's well-known biomedical researchers—including Mark von Itzstein, whose work led to the development of the influenza drug zanamivir, and Ian Gust, director of R&D for vaccine manufacturer CSL—were flying in to

Queensland's Gold Coast to deliver their papers just as exhibitors were pulling down their stalls.

"I've never heard of this happening before," Peter Timms, director of DNA research at the Queensland University of Technology center for diagnostic technologies, told *Nature Medicine*. "It's a very competitive world and this was an important thing for us to get right...I hope that it hasn't done a huge amount of damage [to Australian research]."

Last year's Technomart, held in Chinese Taipei, generated deals worth a total of AUS\$275 million in medicine, defence, agriculture and information technology. Some observers blamed the 1999 collapse on the failure of the private sector operators to deliver an affordable event, even propped up by AUS\$500,000 in government funds.

For biotech-promoting politicians like Queensland Premier Peter Beattie, who had personally invited delegates during trade missions to Asia and North America, the collapse was a disaster, moving him to plead "let's not let this one incident cast a cloud over the excellent reputation and work" being done in Australia.

**Rada Rouse, Brisbane**

## First independent aging research center opens

More than a decade after a US National Academy of Sciences report to the US Congress called for 10 new research centers devoted to aging research, the first and only such center to have come out of the proposal has opened in Novato, California.

The Buck Center, an independent research institute that received \$5.5 million from the Leonard and Beryl Buck Trust in 1999, is expected house up to 50 laboratories within the next five-ten years. The center's president and CEO, Dale E. Bredesen, is recruiting staff to study neurodegenerative diseases associated with the aging process. "Our initial research focus will be to find early markers for diseases such as Alzheimer's Disease and Parkinson's, based on proteogenomics," says Bredesen.

According to Huber Warner of the National Institute of Aging (NIA), which spends \$600 million annually on aging research, the Buck Center is the only in-

dependent aging research center in the US, although there are around two dozen universities that have departments devoted specifically to the field.

"Unfortunately, until aging research reaches the level of prominence of something like cancer, it will be hard to get private funding for these kinds of centers," says Warner.

Using a new \$6 million gift from the Brown Foundation, the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio is also planning to build a free-standing Center for Longevity and Aging Studies. "Right now cancer research is the queen of science. But as the average population grows older...[aging research] is where the money and demand will be," says Director of Aging Research Arlan Richardson. The number of senior citizens in the US is expected to double by the year 2050, making up over 25% of the population.

**Kristine Novak, New York**



The Buck Center