

MOVERS

**Meg Urry, chair, physics department,
Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut**



2001-07: Professor of physics and astronomy, and director of Yale Center for Astronomy and Astrophysics, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut

1996-2001: Astronomer and head of the science programme selection office, Space Telescope Science Institute, Baltimore, Maryland

Meg Urry says she wasn't born to be an astronomer. Interested in everything from English to politics, she found college physics frustrating initially. But that unfamiliar experience pushed her to capitalize on the aspects she liked — the logic and reductive scientific approach — and graduate from Tufts University with a double major in physics and mathematics.

A summer job at an astronomy observatory set her on an uncharted course. "There were no women in front of me. I didn't see a mapped-out path," she says. "So I moved along with a short-term focus on my work."

Still not convinced that astronomy was for her, she pursued a physics PhD at Johns Hopkins University, but ultimately conducted her research at nearby Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland. There, Urry took advantage of a newly launched powerful X-ray satellite to conduct her PhD on blazars, highly variable energy sources associated with a galaxy's central black hole. She crafted a model to explain why these previously misunderstood objects seemed so bright and so variable.

Urry went on to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Center for Space Research for a postdoc working with X-ray observations of supermassive black holes, and became an expert on active galaxies, which emit energies across the electromagnetic spectrum. Next, she did a postdoc at the Space Telescope Science Institute (STScI) in Baltimore, Maryland, which runs the Hubble Space Telescope for NASA. As an STScI faculty member, she used Hubble to show that all normal galaxies have a black hole at their centre and that active galaxies are simply a phase of galactic evolution. While coordinating Hubble proposal reviews, Urry discovered her administrative bent.

Eager to teach, she became the first tenured woman in the department of physics at Yale University in 2001. She was also appointed co-chair of the National Academy of Sciences Committee on Astronomy and Astrophysics, where she helps guide strategic planning. This July, Urry will become the first woman chair of physics at Yale.

As department chair, she will encourage undergraduates to take, and more importantly enjoy, physics. She hopes to continue Yale's excellence in physics by anticipating future needs and growth areas, her primary challenge according to her predecessor, Ramamurti Shankar. "The real trick," says Urry, the once-reluctant astronomer, "is to think about what questions will be asked in ten years." ■

Virginia Gewin

BRICKS & MORTAR

Colleagues against cancer

The United Kingdom's largest new cancer research initiative for 40 years opened on 2 February. The £50-million (US\$98-million) Cancer Research UK Cambridge Research Institute (CRI) is set to transform UK cancer research. Its strategic location and structure are designed to bridge basic research and clinical practice.

Built on the University of Cambridge campus, the CRI sits nextdoor to Addenbrooke's teaching hospital. With about half of the 30 group-leader posts filled, a second round of recruitment is under way. The goal is to have basic cancer-biology experts working with clinician-scientists and leaders in genomics, imaging and bioinformatics. Investigators are eager to find basic scientists with skills in epigenetics and tumour microenvironments — but are open to any outstanding candidates.

Director Bruce Ponder and his colleagues are looking for people to head specific cancer programmes such as breast, lung or prostate. They also need an epidemiologist to bring together cohorts for studies of early diagnostic intervention. Above all else, however, they want investigators eager to collaborate in the clinic.

By providing research opportunities for clinicians, deputy director and stem-cell biologist Fiona Watt hopes

to help basic scientists see cancer as a disease rather than an intellectual problem. "I think sometimes, perhaps more so in Britain than the United States, there's a feeling that clinicians are not doing high-quality science," says Watt. "We've disproved that myth in one stroke."

Jason Carroll, a hormone-receptor expert and one of several junior faculty members recruited last year from the United States, says he was lured by core funding and the ease of conducting research straight away. Instead of struggling for grants in the United States, he receives funding for three postdoc or technician positions as well as for one student every two years. (Senior faculty members receive six paid positions as well as a student every two years.)

Interdisciplinary research projects include a virtual Cambridge Cancer Centre, which will bring together engineers and cell biologists. Ponder says a new master's degree will bring maths students in as well. "The idea is that our new institute will be a nucleus of massive cancer-related activity across the university," says Watt.

Once immediate talent needs are met, Ponder says they will decide how to expand existing themes or start new ones, such as drug development. ■

Virginia Gewin

POSTDOC JOURNAL

Where the rocks are

By the time you read this, I will be settling into my new geology postdoc position in Johannesburg. As I write, I'm still having trouble believing that my big move is actually happening. My visa is stuck in my passport, the flights are booked, and my life is slowly being squashed into as few boxes as possible. Yet part of me still doesn't believe that any of it is really happening; probably the same part of me that is still a little intimidated by it all.

We're told that expanding one's research horizons is an essential part of developing as a scientist. If you want to enjoy use of the best labs, and work with the best groups, you often have to look abroad for your new perspective.

Yet, another consideration for us geologists is getting access to that critical outcrop, where the rocks are of the right age and composition to record clues about our planet's past tectonic and climatic history. I spent my PhD in Southampton, on the south coast of England, suffering the consequences of my field area being located in the opposite hemisphere from my lab.

For my new project, if I need to collect more samples, or check some observations, I'll only have to endure a few hours' drive rather than a long-haul flight. For that, if nothing else, it's well worth overcoming a little trepidation about making a big change. ■

Chris Rowan is starting a postdoctoral fellowship in the geology department at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa.