

Ripe opportunities for regional collaboration in east Asia

East Asian collaboration in molecular biology could enhance the scientific viability of the region, but it requires more enthusiastic support from potential participants — particularly Japan.

Despite the flowering of scientific excellence in many east Asian countries in recent years, researchers in that part of the world in search of collaborators are often inclined to look right past each other to colleagues in the United States or Europe. The tendency persists despite the geographical convenience of local collaboration, the common scientific and cultural heritage of the region, and the knowledge that major institutions in the United States, in particular, are liable to treat collaborators from abroad as junior partners.

Most countries in east Asia regard themselves as being short of top-level researchers and, like Singapore and Hong Kong, often rely on attracting such researchers from abroad to fill such positions (see News Feature, page 370, and Naturejobs, page 4). But if these nations are to attract such people — and to keep their own best talent — they need to work far more closely with their neighbours.

Since 1997, researchers in the biological sciences have been trying to achieve this through an informal research network, known as the Asia-Pacific International Molecular Biology Network (IMBN). The IMBN's 250 members want to establish a regional equivalent of the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO), with its own laboratory and all the trappings of an international, collaborative research institution. But the concept has so far made limited headway, partly because of lack of support from the region's strongest nations.

The kind of scientific collaboration that IMBN members have in mind could proceed now, without waiting for closer political ties

between participant nations. Both EMBO and CERN, the European particle physics laboratory, were set up without relying on the European Union or its predecessor organizations.

The key challenge for IMBN is to obtain commitments from the strongest nations in the region — Japan, Australia and Singapore — in order to build the project's momentum. Global experience suggests that collaboration cannot occur without top-level political commitment from national governments. Officials in Singapore say that it may be prepared to match any funds forthcoming from Japan, although the Japanese government has yet to fully embrace the concept.

But Japan, arguably, has more to gain from the project than anybody else. By supporting it, Japan could show regional leadership at low diplomatic risk and relatively little financial cost. The project would also help Japan to cultivate the international outlook that its scientific community has struggled to achieve. Additionally, an efficient Asian molecular-biology laboratory could provide a badly needed voice for the region's biologists. They may otherwise find themselves unheard in international discussions, where their European colleagues are represented by EMBO and their American ones by the National Institutes of Health.

In Europe, CERN and EMBO have shown the importance of formal regional cooperation, particularly in providing a counterweight to the United States. East Asia could make similar gains by actively exploring the options for regional collaboration in molecular biology. ■

Back from the brink

The government's threat to suspend clinical trials at America's largest medical school highlights an impasse over funding.

Biomedical researchers in the United States were genuinely stunned last week to learn that the federal government was suspending the clinical research programmes at Johns Hopkins University (JHU) in Baltimore, the largest academic medical centre in the country, and one of the most revered.

The suspension announced by the fledgling Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) was condemned in unusually forthright terms by JHU researchers and administrators, who clearly felt that the government had overreached itself. Dispensing with the usual pleasantries, the university went on the offensive, publicly condemning what it regards as the OHRP's rushed judgement.

Both sides are now backing off somewhat (see page 363). Government spokesmen are explaining, rather meekly, that trials will be allowed to continue if it is clearly in patients' interests that they do so. Johns Hopkins has negotiated an action plan that will satisfy the OHRP's concerns and allow the suspension to be gradually lifted.

However, the charges being made against JHU's system for the internal review of clinical research protocols are not trivial. It has

been widely noted over the past several years that the institutional review boards (IRBs) that do this job across the United States are badly over-stretched. It is surprising, to put it mildly, that JHU obtained approval for the non-therapeutic administration to healthy volunteers of an asthma-inducing agent whose toxicity could have been verified by a simple Medline search. And it is salutary that the death of one of those volunteers, 24-year-old laboratory technician Ellen Roche, was first made public through the good offices of *The Baltimore Sun*, rather than through official channels.

Clinical researchers confront illness and death every day and are understandably impatient with bureaucratic requirements imposed by agencies such as the OHRP to cater for sometimes-hypothetical public concerns. The work of the researchers is indeed too valuable to halt. But if the threat of such a suspension at an establishment of Johns Hopkins' standing helps to dispel complacency about IRB reform — and forces the medical schools and the Congress to stop passing the buck and decide who should pay for a properly resourced IRB system — then it will have served a useful purpose. ■