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Big or small neuroscience?

Over the past few years, a number of large multidisciplinary neuroscience centres have sprung up around the world. And there are several more on the drawing board, including what may well be a leading example for the field — a \$270-million facility on the Maryland campus of the US National Institutes of Health.

Large-scale facilities are important because the computational and imaging equipment needed in neuroscience is expensive and should be shared. In addition, bringing scientists from various disciplines together in one place and organizing them around broad research areas should help to advance the field by providing different perspectives on a given problem. So says one of the plan's architects, Gerry Fischbach, Columbia University's vice-president for health and biomedical sciences.

But Fischbach doesn't yet know what the plan, or others like it, will mean for neuroscience employment. Ideally, such centres would increase the overall opportunities for neuroscientists. But, if they are improperly funded, they might result in just the reshuffling of existing personnel.

Either way, Nancy Rothwell, president of the British Neuroscience Society and professor of biology at the University of Manchester, agrees that there is a move towards "larger critical mass" in neuroscience. But she cautions that such efforts shouldn't mean that scientists who prefer to go it alone are excluded from funding. "Many here would not want to see the loss of the individual scientist who is clearly outstanding and may not want or need to be part of a larger group," she says.

It's clear that scientific arguments exist for both approaches. But all too often, political and economic considerations prevail — disappointing proponents of either or both.

Paul Smaglik

Naturejobs editor

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