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# BIOMEDICAL 'IDEAS POWERHOUSE' OPENS ITS DOORS IN DENMARK

A conversation with **PROFESSOR ANDERS NYKJÆR**, Department of Biomedicine, Aarhus University, Denmark



Last month, the Department of Biomedicine at Aarhus University inaugurated its state of the art research centre, the Skou Building. It is named after former faculty member Jens Christian Skou who won the Nobel Prize in 1997 for his description of the sodium-potassium pump, which has a crucial role in cells. Neuroscientist Anders Nykjær, core group leader of the Danish Research Institute of Translational Neuroscience (DANDRITE), which will be a large stakeholder in the new building, and director of the Center for Proteins in Memory (PROMEMO), is excited that his laboratory will be one of the first to move into the new building and describes how its interdisciplinary environment will generate new creative ideas.

**What difference will the new Skou Building make to your research?**

The new building will be a powerhouse where ideas will be generated. It will allow people from different disciplines to work even closer together and develop synergy. It is important to minimize the physical distance between researchers as this causes barriers. The building also contains advanced laboratories and state of the art animal facilities, which is important as sophisticated transgenic animals are critical in translational research.

My main research interest is how receptors regulate psychiatric disorders such as ADHD, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, and molecular mechanisms underlying memory. In PROMEMO we study what makes you remember certain things and forget others. What proteins are associated with memory and what are the circuitry networks? For example, if I ask anyone where they were when they heard about 9/11, most people can remember that clearly — but not where they were the same date a year ago.

Moving to the new building will provide an interdisciplinary environment that is critical to address and solve the big questions in neuroscience and in

biomedicine in general. It is vital that groups with different expertise come together to provide scientific input in order to propel research forward.

**What makes Aarhus University's Department of Biomedicine an attractive place to work?**

It's a very strong scientific environment with an unusually open and relaxed atmosphere. There is not much of a barrier between the senior and junior scientists, which is really important as it makes the younger ones feel confident to come up with new ideas and suggestions.

The Department of Biomedicine is very international and has become even more so over the last ten years. Currently there are more than 30 nationalities working here including researchers from the United States, Japan, China, Iran and countries in Europe. We have been lucky to be able to attract some of the smartest brains from around the world. As a matter of fact we have vacant professorships at the department right now.

It's a very open and welcoming community. There is also good support to help international researchers find accommodation and, if they have kids, help them find

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schools. It's a great place to work as there is the lively city plus the sea and the forests.

**Why is international collaboration and interdisciplinary research important?**

Our department has a very strong tradition of integrating faculties from health and basic science. We like to foster collaboration. There are regular meetings for all scientists at the department where people from different research groups present and explain what they are doing. For example, anatomists may come and explain to their colleagues in neighbouring fields what they are working on. This can be very inspiring and it is an extremely good way of networking and initiating new collaborations.

To take science to the next level you need to get the brightest minds to come here and this influx of international researchers also stimulates the brightest minds from Denmark. Internationalisation allows us to experience different ways of thinking and it also facilitates

collaboration with a researcher's former institution. Neuroscience at Aarhus University is becoming a lighthouse, attracting the best scientists from around the world. Over the next 5-10 years I predict it will become even stronger.

**How is science perceived in Denmark?**

Funding opportunities within bioscience are very good in Denmark. More than 50% of funding comes from foundations including the Novo Nordisk Foundation, Lundbeck Foundation and the Danish National Research Foundation. For example, at Aarhus University, the Lundbeck Foundation supports neuroscience for €20 million a year. The foundation also launched the €1 million Brain Prize, which has been important to increase the visibility of Danish neuroscience.

There is substantial interest in science in general and neuroscience in particular in Denmark. Public science talks are incredibly popular – for example, when the winners of the Brain Prize present their research. Demand for tickets has been so great the talks are now live-streamed to 50 cinemas in Denmark. They're like a rock concert by the Rolling Stones.



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— says Anders Nykjær, professor at the Department of Biomedicine at Aarhus University in Denmark. The building is named after the recently deceased Nobel Prize winner Jens Christian Skou, who worked at the department for many years.

The Department of Biomedicine is one of five departments at the Faculty of Health at Aarhus University in Denmark. The faculty was founded in 1936 and currently has 2,000 employees, 600 PhD students and 4,400 students. Health offers a wide range of healthcare degree programmes, including medicine, dentistry, sport science and public health science.

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