

nature  
[ **inside**view ]



Profile Feature as seen in *Nature* 6th December 2018

## A RESEARCH HOME AWAY FROM HOME

A conversation with **ROBERT A. FENTON**, Professor of Molecular Cell Biology at the Department of Biomedicine, Aarhus University, Denmark



Moving halfway across the world to pursue your research dream is a big step. After starting his career in Manchester, UK, and taking up a fellowship at the National Heart Lung and Blood Institutes (NHLBI), Bethesda, USA, Robert Fenton found a place to call home and a supportive location for his research in Denmark. He has spent 13 years at Aarhus University, and is now a full professor in molecular cell biology, based in the Department of Biomedicine.

### What is your current area of research?

My research is in an area that has fascinated me for many years — the molecular regulation of membrane proteins in the kidney involved in sodium chloride, water and phosphate transport. I focus on basic research, but this has clinical implications, for example in control of high blood-pressure or diabetes. This link between clinical and basic science is becoming increasingly important.

I take a multidisciplinary approach, and use a wide variety of techniques, including proteomics and bioinformatics, high-resolution imaging, and various animal models.

### Why did you decide to move away from working in the USA?

When I began considering my first independent investigator position the US funding environment was very tight, so I started to look elsewhere.

The funding opportunities in Denmark are very good, especially for junior researchers and international scientists. This includes the larger foundations such as the Novo Nordisk Foundation and the Lundbeck Foundation, both of which support independent, investigator-driven research. There is also money available for advanced researchers who want longer-term support for basic research.

### What drew you to Aarhus University in 2005?

Aarhus University's Department of Biomedicine is a hotbed for internationally recognized research in membrane protein biology. Its alumni includes Jens Christian Skou, awarded a Nobel prize for the discovery of the sodium-potassium pump.

Joining gave me the opportunity to get my first independent faculty position, and to work with key people in the field. The department's support staff bring their own areas of expertise, which was particularly useful for a new researcher.

Aarhus University gave me the freedom to create my own research environment, as well as access to world-class lab facilities and infrastructure. It was a fantastic career move, and I now have a team of around a dozen researchers, supported by expert technical staff.

The research environment is more relaxed and informal than in the USA and UK, and younger researchers aren't afraid to question and challenge. This provides new ideas and approaches.

### Did you experience challenges outside the lab?

When I moved to Aarhus, my partner moved with me and we are now married with two children. We didn't think we would be here for that long at the beginning and now it's home. The university and city

### THE WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN DENMARK IS REALLY GOOD.

are very helpful in finding jobs for partners and schools for children, they actually guarantee jobs for spouses.

My children are native Danish speakers and go to local Danish schools, but there are also international schools for parents who want their children to continue their English education.

The work-life balance in Denmark is really good. Working hours tend to be flexible and centred around school hours, making it easier for young families. People put an emphasis on productivity rather than just the hours spent at work, and understand the importance of life outside work.

### Have you had any language issues?

Nearly every Danish academic speaks fluent English, and the university and department have experienced exponential growth in international research. The majority of scientific discussions are in English, there are opportunities to teach in English.

My research group includes six different nationalities, and we use English as a common language. However, the university does offer free Danish classes for day-to-day

life, and I am comfortable in conversation and in general meetings. I do sometimes have to ask my children, who are fully bilingual, to translate certain words for me!

### What's the next move for your team?

The Department of Biomedicine will shortly begin its move into the new, purpose-built Skou Building, named after the Nobel laureate who died aged 99 in May 2018.

The building will provide a single location for biomedicine, bringing together research groups and disciplines from six buildings across the campus. Such an interdisciplinary setting is vital in today's research environment, mixing up ideas, approaches, technologies, experiences and strengths. It will allow interactions to occur by chance as well as by intention in both work and social situations.

The state-of-the-art building will include centralized animal-housing facilities, and better access to shared infrastructure and core technologies such as genomics, proteomics, transcriptomics and bioinformatics. The new building is light, spacious and will be a nicer place to work, from both a professional and a well-being perspective.



Aarhus University gave me the freedom to create my own research environment, as well as access to world-class lab facilities and infrastructure.

— says Robert Fenton, professor at the Department of Biomedicine at Aarhus University in Denmark.

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 1,500 employees, 600 PhD students and approx. 4,400 students. Health offers a wide range of healthcare degree programmes, including medicine, dentistry, sport science and public health science.

[health.au.dk/en/cell](http://health.au.dk/en/cell)



