

## Human genetics research in Iceland to diversify

Iceland Genomics Corp, a Delaware-based biotech company whose only asset is its UVS subsidiary in Reykjavik, has announced an umbrella agreement with the Icelandic Cancer Society and the University Hospitals in Reykjavik. Under the deal, UVS, which is focused on post-genomic research, can negotiate research agreements with particular labs and individuals at these institutions. So far, three research agreements—focussing on breast cancer and bladder cancer—have been forged with the Cancer Society's Molecular and Cellular Biology Research Laboratory. The National University hospitals have agreed to provide samples and information from patients who give informed consent to UVS, which plans to build up its own cancer database. "The goal of this company [UVS] is to have comprehensive access to all the major cancers in this country and study them all together," says Bernhard Palsson, professor of bioengineering at the University of California (San Diego), who co-founded the company in 1998.

Until now, DeCODE Genetics had a vir-

tual monopoly on commercial human genetics research in Iceland, and there has been much opposition to its plans for a centralized healthcare database (*Nat. Biotechnol.*, 17, 27). While commentators point out that DeCODE's landmark deal with Roche did not cover cancer (*Nat. Biotechnol.*, 16, 896), they say DeCODE's CEO Kari Stefansson has stated his interest in the area several times and that UVS is going to be competition for DeCODE. But Palsson insists that "There is minimal overlap between these companies," explaining that UVS is much more focussed on functional genomics databasing and expression profiling. *ED*

## GM health food

A specialist food manufacturer that promotes vegetarian diets and health food and generally supports the environmental movement has come out publicly in support of genetically modified foods and against the positions adopted by groups such as the Foundation on Economic Trends, the National Family Farm Coalition, and Greenpeace. Greg Caton, the president and

founder of Lumen Foods (Lake Charles, LA) puts the company's position clearly on its website (<http://soybean.com>). Caton compares Luddite attitudes to GM food to the reaction to microwave ovens in the 1980s. At health foods trade shows at the time, people would tell him that cooking with microwaves was "killing all the nutrients with radiation." Caton says that studies have now shown that "microwaving reduces the time that nutrients are exposed to heat and actually results in food with marginally higher nutrient value." Caton was a student at Maharishi International University (Fairfield, IA) in 1979 and knew firsthand the scientists who are now the major proponents of non-GM foods. Their fundamentalist position, he says, is that GM foods alter natural law. He notes that the founder of his alma mater, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, predicted in 1990 that, in a few years, people who consumed GM foods would suffer severe health consequences. Caton says that the problem for those who oppose genetically engineered foods is that their arguments are all theoretical, and if something bad doesn't happen soon, the "fun-loving non-GMO crowds are going to end up looking like the anti-microwave crowds." *JH*

## Research collaborations

| Company 1                              | Company 2  | \$ (Millions) | Details   |
|--|--|---------------|---|
| Monsanto<br>(St. Louis, MO)            | Paradigm Genetics<br>(Research Triangle Park, NC)    | 55            | A broad collaboration in the field of functional genomics. Monsanto will pay Paradigm \$55 million to analyze its gene sequencing, bioinformatics, and functional genomics research to develop a product discovery platform that Monsanto can use for commercialization purposes.   |
| Medarex<br>(Princeton, NJ)             | Eos Biotechnology<br>(S. San Francisco, CA)          | 25            | A multiyear alliance in which Eos will identify and validate novel antibody targets associated with cancer and other diseases, and then use Medarex's HuMAB-Mouse technology to create human antibodies to those targets. Medarex will provide Eos with up to \$25 million, consisting of \$5 million up front and an additional \$20 million in milestones. Eos and Medarex will jointly own at least six antibody products and Medarex will have exclusive marketing rights in Europe for some of them. |
| BioChem Pharma<br>(BCP; Laval, Canada) | Microbiotix<br>(Worcester, MA)                       | *             | A three-year collaboration to identify and develop novel antibiotics that inhibit bacterial DNA replication. Under terms of the alliance, BioChem will commit research funding and personnel and will purchase an equity stake in Microbiotix. Microbiotix research will focus on identifying enzyme inhibitors that are needed for replication of bacterial DNA.   |
| Corixa<br>(Seattle, WA)                | Genset<br>(Paris, France)                            | *             | An agreement to collaborate on sequencing the genome of an undisclosed organism. Corixa will provide Genset with materials related to the organism, and Genset will use its high-throughput screening and bioinformatics production capacity to provide the genome to Corixa in exchange for payment. Corixa will use the data to develop immunotherapeutic products such as vaccines.  |
| Oxford Biomedica<br>(Oxford, UK)       | Immuno-Designed<br>Molecules<br>(IDM; Paris, France) | *             | An agreement to codevelop cell-based therapy programs, which fight diseases such as cancer using cells from the patient's own immune system. Oxford has developed novel methods for genetic engineering of immune cells and IDM has developed cell processor technology that allows safe manipulation of those cells.   |

\*Financial details are not disclosed.