

New directions

***Nature Immunology* launches its first podcast with a historical piece on immunology at the UK's National Institute of Medical Research as plans develop for the future of the institute.**

The Medical Research Council (MRC) was founded in 1913 and is the main source of public funding for the biomedical sciences in the UK. There are several MRC research units throughout the UK, but the flagship center covering all biomedical sciences—the National Institute of Medical Research (NIMR)—is located in Mill Hill, a suburb in northwest London. Since the beginnings of immunology at the NIMR more than 60 years ago, the institute has been the scene of many important insights into the understanding of the immune response. Many prominent immunologists have passed through the corridors of the institute, and some continue to enrich the science of immunology around the world to this day. The story of some of these discoveries and the scientists who made them forms the topic of *Nature Immunology's* first podcast, “60 years of immunology at the MRC National Institute of Medical Research (NIMR), Mill Hill, UK” (<http://www.nature.com/ni/podcast/>).

The podcast features contributions from six important figures in the history of immunology at the NIMR: Brigitte Askonas, Emil Unanue, David Sacks, Richard Flavell, Alain Townsend and Anne O'Garra (the present head of the Division of Immunoregulation). The personal and immunological reflections of these scientists paint an engaging picture of the intellectual ferment at the NIMR over the past 60 years. Brigitte Askonas was one of the first members of the nascent immunology division at the NIMR and nurtured several prominent immunologists in her laboratory. It was with Askonas that Emil Unanue and Alain Townsend made important discoveries about antigen presentation and recognition. The NIMR was also a place for early immunoparasitological research, and it was there that David Sacks spent some of his formative scientific years. Finally, Richard Flavell came to the NIMR in the late 1970s and was instrumental in initiating a highly productive era of research at the institute.

Although the history of immunology at Mill Hill is surely illustrious, its future was for some time uncertain. In 2003 the MRC announced plans to close the institute and relocate parts of it to a university hospital site in Cambridge. That move formed a cornerstone of the MRC's forward-investment strategy that encompassed an aim to further encourage links between science and medicine and direct efforts toward more translational research. However, after intense opposition to those plans, both from within the NIMR and from without, the proposal was scrapped (some of the controversies have been discussed in a *Nature Immunology* editorial: <http://www.nature.com/ni/journal/v4/n6/full/ni0603-499.html>). As part of a subsequent consultation, a task force was convened to consider alternative plans to the NIMR closure and it was finally decided to relocate it to a site in central London beside St.

Pancras International train station. The plans for the relocation were finally approved earlier this year by London's mayor.

The new institute has been christened the UK Centre for Medical Research and Innovation (UKCMRI) and was founded by a consortium consisting of the MRC, Cancer Research UK (the UK's largest cancer research charity), the Wellcome Trust (the world's second largest endowed medical research charity) and University College London (a major research university). The commitment and financial support to the UKCMRI by so many exemplary institutions is definitely a positive sign for the future of the institute. In addition, the central location of the UKCMRI with its convenient position next to important transport links and proximity to large teaching hospitals is surely also an advantage. Additional details about the UKCMRI are available online (<http://www.ukcmri.ac.uk/>).

Although they allay some initial fears, the proposals for the UKCMRI have not been without their share of controversy, not least because the new site acquired for the relocation is less than one tenth of the area of the present site at Mill Hill. Potentially this could be problematic, because the number of personnel at the new site will be much greater than that now at the NIMR. The UKCMRI will need to be a very tall and deep building indeed to comfortably accommodate the 1,500 staff and attendant facilities projected to be working there by 2015. Another criticism is that the relocation of the NIMR to central London will only shift the gravity of medical research further into what is already considered the 'Golden Triangle' of London, Oxford and Cambridge. This relocation, coupled with changes to the UK's university and research funding over the coming years, will probably be to the detriment of other institutions outside these fortunate locations. Other objections are much more dubious and have doubtlessly been whipped up by a few recent screaming tabloid headlines characterizing the institute as a “virus superlab” in the “heart of London.” But even a sober analysis might question the wisdom of locating high category biosafety research laboratories in a major conurbation and immediately adjacent to such important transport hubs. However, the public has been assured that the necessary security and organizational structures will be in place to counter any potential problems.

As the ink dries on the paper authorizing relocation of the NIMR, we are quietly confident about its future and that of immunology at the UKCMRI. The multidisciplinary nature of the new institute and the central involvement of such key partners as the Wellcome Trust, Cancer Research UK and University College London, as well as more peripherally the British Library, all bode well. We are hopeful that in years to come, immunologists will be exchanging ideas in the bar and telling new and exciting stories about experiments at the UKCMRI and that *Nature Immunology* will be there to chronicle them.

