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The chips are down

Investing in science is a bit like playing roulette — you can spread your chips on several numbers, anticipating modest returns, or you can stack them high on a few, in hopes of a big payoff. Several Norwegian biologists had hoped that their government, when deciding how to award 140 million kroner (US\$18.7 million) a year over 10 years for new scientific initiatives, would wager in favour of biotech (see *Naturejobs* 2 May, 2002). However, with the announcement last month of 13 diverse ‘Centres of Excellence’ — only one of which is explicitly linked to biomedicine — the country seems instead to be hedging its bets.

The sole biomedical winner has mixed feelings about his largesse. Ole Petter Ottersen, who received the nod to establish the Centre for Molecular Biology and Neuroscience at the University of Oslo, says he is happy to receive the funding, but adds that his joy is tempered by the lack of investment elsewhere in his field. “Biomedicine ought to have several centres,” he says. Two more of the 13 centres have biological components — the Agricultural University of Norway (NLH) has been awarded an aquaculture centre, and the International Centre for the Biology of Memory will be hosted at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology at Trondheim.

What does this distribution of limited resources mean in terms of recruitment? Norway — which has a goal of attracting more scientists from abroad — will need to draw from more diverse backgrounds than if it had invested only in biology. This probably comes as positive news for scientists looking for work in fields in which Norway already has a history of research, such as climate change and geosciences. Bergen, for example, will host new centres in both of these areas. But for Norwegian biologists, the news means that the country will have a harder time reaching the ‘critical mass’ that is necessary to compete for talent with the more established biotech hubs. Indeed, it seems that this is a game the government is reluctant to play.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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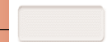
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