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## Taking the initiative

**B**iomedical research in London sprawls throughout the city, spread between various university colleges, hospitals and numerous biotechnology companies (see pages 4–5). A prime example of the sort of components that make up this disparate network is the National Institute for Medical Research in Mill Hill, north London, which employs about 600 people.

The institute is run by Britain's Medical Research Council (MRC), and is seen by many as a desirable place to work because it has steady funding, good facilities and is reasonably close to potential collaborators with expertise in other disciplines. In addition, because the MRC is so closely involved, research at the institute is somewhat less susceptible to the political vagaries that make funding of the council's off-site projects a little less stable (see *Nature* 418, 714; 2002).

But these attributes do have a downside — they make it a lot harder to secure a post there. So how would one go about landing a postdoc position in a lab such as this? The usual way is simply by responding to an advertisement, says Steve Ley, an immunologist at the institute. But a more effective approach might be to find out who at a lab is doing the kind of work you want to pursue, reading up on their work and then writing them a letter regardless of whether a position has actually been advertised.

A French graduate student, motivated by the lack of academic postdoc positions in her own country, landed a slot in Ley's lab using just this method. "It shows a level of initiative that you might not get from adverts," Ley says. And with increasing international competition — 75% of the Mill Hill facility's postdocs are from abroad — that level of initiative may well prove to be necessary.

**Paul Smaglik**  
*Naturejobs* editor



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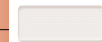
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