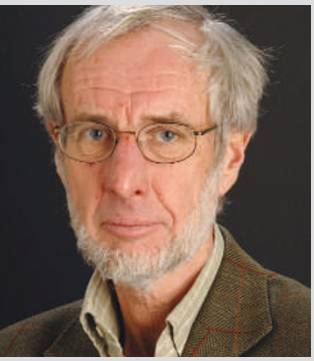
NATURE|Vol 444|2 November 2006

MOVERS

Hans-Olov Adami, Chair, Department of Epidemiology, Harvard School of Public Health



2006–present: Professor of cancer epidemiology, Karolinska Institute
1997–2005: Professor and chairman, Department of Medical Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Karolinska Institute, Stockholm, Sweden
1990–97: Professor and then chairman, Department of Cancer Epidemiology, Uppsala University, Sweden

Hans-Olov Adami believes that today's students have a dangerous preoccupation with career planning. "Our mission isn't to publish papers, our mission is to make discoveries," he says. Adami has followed this credo throughout his own career. Although trained as a medical surgeon, Adami followed his passion to become one of the top medical and cancer epidemiologists in the world.

At Uppsala University in Sweden, Adami spent 17 years practising medicine and surgery. But it was his doctoral dissertation project — on the epidemiology of breast cancer — that sparked his interest in a new career path. Lacking mentors at Uppsala, Adami taught himself epidemiological study design. "All of a sudden, I realized how medical knowledge is generated," he says, emphasizing the often uncertain relationship between epidemiological research, which pinpoints the causes of disease, and clinical research, which diagnoses and treats. With clinical research colleagues, he began his first series of epidemiological and clinical projects soon after completing his PhD.

In 1986, he was appointed to a new senior research position in cancer epidemiology at Uppsala University, funded by the Swedish Cancer Society. He subsequently surrendered his surgical gloves to pursue research. The programme's success culminated in Adami's appointment as national chair of cancer epidemiology in 1990. Wanting more security for his employees, Adami made the bold decision to move the entire department to the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm. The department grew to more than 160 people, established the largest unit for biostatistics in Sweden and expanded into areas outside cancer, such as reproductive epidemiology.

Meanwhile, Adami forged connections with Harvard's school of public health as an adjunct professor. From next February, he will chair the department of epidemiology, and plans to use this opportunity to expand on global projects with non-Western countries such as Singapore. Current chair Meir Stampfer, whose work has entered controversial areas such as the link between obesity and mortality, says Adami's international perspective is unique and will help him lead the department in an increasingly global field.

Adami has already created a new training module that will divide trainees' time between Sweden and Singapore. He hopes it will help young people embrace their curiosity, rather than their perceived career goals. ■

Virginia Gewin

BRICKS & MORTAR

A bench to call your own

Aspiring entrepreneurs at the University of California celebrate the first birthday of an unusual biotech incubator this month. The QB3 Garage lets them rent the equivalent of a single lab bench, right in the heart of a premier research institute.

Incubators are usually located near university labs, but rarely in the same building. Yet in a five-storey building at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), six tiny companies split a 232-square-metre space, which includes a common laboratory plus private sections for offices or labs.

Named after the garage in Palo Alto where Bill Hewlett and David Packard launched their business in 1939, the QB3 Garage is the brainchild of the California Institute for Quantitative Biomedical Research (QB3), which has sites at UCSF and at the Berkeley and Santa Cruz campuses. The state government funds QB3 to help academics commercialize research.

The Garage helps companies through the transition from research idea to new business entity by keeping them close to potential academic collaborators and by leasing very small spaces, so firms don't pay rent for space they don't need. Also, the Garage doesn't take equity or intellectual property from its tenants.

The two founders of MynoSys Cellular Devices, which is developing a microknife for cellular surgery, rent the Garage's smallest space, 12 square metres. "We could probably do everything we're doing now at a different place, but it would cost us more, and not just in terms of money," says ophthalmologist David Sretavan. He adds that the location aids academic collaborations and the intellectual environment fosters innovation.

Tenants must be affiliated with research at QB3 or the university, their work must have biomedical applications, and QB3 spin-offs have priority as space is limited. Most tenants are funded by small business grants from the US government.

Leases last a mere 18 months. The goal is to give nascent companies a chance to perform proof-of-concept experiments or create prototypes before finding additional investment and moving on, explains Douglas Crawford, associate director of QB3. It's worked so far for the first tenant, Fluxion Biosciences, which got seed financing in September and plans to move to larger quarters in 2007.

Meanwhile, Crawford says he's had to turn down five applicants in as many weeks for lack of space, and other institutions have contacted him about starting garages on their campuses. ■

Monya Baker

GRADUATE JOURNAL

The joys of communication

Throughout my university years, I've spent a lot of time teaching and writing popular-science articles for magazines and newspapers. Sometimes people wonder why I bother. It's true that without such activities I might have graduated sooner. But I think scientists have an obligation to educate the public. Even in a highly educated country such as Finland, up to a third of the population does not believe in evolution, according to a recent European Union survey.

Apart from that, there are perks to communicating science. It allows me to stay in touch with fields of biology unrelated to my research. I've had the chance to observe weather conditions in space, learn how sociologists analyse political jargon and visit the inside of a magnetic resonance brain scanner. I am inspired by these reminders of how exciting scientific endeavours can be.

Teaching improves my understanding of science because it forces me to think things through. Sometimes I discover a supposedly basic idea that is not clear to me at all. When I'm lost in the fog of my own research, a student may ask a question that actually helps me to see more clearly. And best of all, teaching is a great way to find the connection between concepts. As I write the introduction to my thesis, trying to link abstract modelling, population genetics and behaviour, I'm grateful for this skill. ■

Katja Bargum is a graduate student in the Department of Biological and Environmental Sciences at the University of Helsinki, Finland.