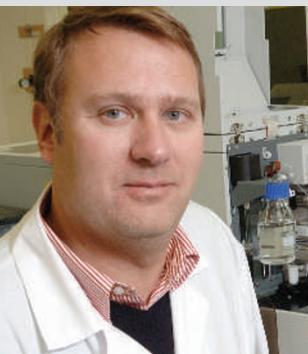


MOVERS

**Christoph Borchers, director,
University of Victoria–Genome BC Proteomics
Centre, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada**



2004–06: Director, Biomarkers Facility Core, Center of Environmental Health Susceptibility, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina
2001–06: Faculty director, UNC–Duke Michael Hooker Proteomics Center, Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Christoph Borchers has spent his entire career fascinated by the prospect of solving biomedical problems using mass spectrometry analyses of biomolecules. Only recently has this become a reality.

When Borchers began his undergraduate chemistry degree at the University of Konstanz in his native Germany, it was impossible to analyse macromolecules such as proteins without destroying their structure. By the time Borchers completed his PhD there in 1996, new ionization techniques not only allowed him to analyse intact molecular ions formed from peptides and proteins, but also to determine the amino-acid sequence as well as the primary protein structure. He used these tools to identify the binding site of a protein known for pumping drugs out of cells. "Colleagues still laughed at the thought of analysing proteins with mass spectrometry," says Borchers.

With no jobs in Germany in this emerging field, Borchers jumped at an offer from the US National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences in North Carolina's Research Triangle Park. During his five years there he went from visiting fellow to staff scientist. His chairman suggested he give a seminar at the University of North Carolina; Borchers didn't realize that it was an interview as well. He accepted a position as assistant professor and also became founding faculty director of the university's Michael Hooker Proteomics Core Center.

When he arrived, the entire proteomics facility consisted of one mass spectrometer. With help from an anonymous donor and grants from the National Center for Research Resources, he amassed more advanced equipment. Nearby Duke University joined as the centre grew. Then his success convinced a search committee to hire him as director of the University of Victoria–Genome BC Proteomics Centre.

"He's demonstrated the ability to bring together top-class researchers and industry collaborators around the health applications of proteomics — major areas we want to concentrate on at BC," says Martin Taylor, the University of Victoria's vice-president of research.

It was a tough decision, says Borchers, but a thriving Canadian proteomics community convinced him to move. Genome Canada and Genome BC fund large-scale research, and Genome BC has a network of interested clinicians. He now wants to expand research capabilities by developing diagnostic tools for early disease detection, and developing mass spectrometry-based structural proteomics. ■

Virginia Gewin

NETWORKS & SUPPORT

Better offices, better postdocs

Postdocs often exist in no-man's land. No longer students in the care of the research institution, they are left without guidance about benefits, training or professional development. University offices dedicated to their needs can help. Yet of 135 academic institutions tracked by the US National Postdoctoral Association (NPA), 34 have no postdoc office and 61 have no postdoc association. Some 14 have no postdoc infrastructure at all.

Creating the infrastructure is a time-consuming and often frustrating endeavour. In response, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, which funded the formation of the NPA in 2003, recently awarded funding to create a postdoc leadership mentoring project. It will pair mentors who have set up postdoc associations or offices with protégés who seek to do so.

The project offers up to 45 travel awards for mentors and protégés to go to the NPA annual meeting in Berkeley, California, from 30 March to 1 April. It will be an important venue for founders to pass on experience to the next generation of postdocs — a history that is too easily lost after people move on, says Chris Blagden, a founder of the postdoc association at New York University's School of Medicine.

According to a recent survey by the researchers' society Sigma Xi, 82% of

postdocs represented by an office or association were satisfied with their experience; 9% reported conflicts. But only 59% of unrepresented postdocs were satisfied and 22% reported conflicts. "We've been able to make the case that postdoc offices and associations are critical elements for postdoc training," says Alyson Reed, the NPA's executive director.

Virginia Cox of the Sloan Foundation hopes the project will lead to the formation of at least ten associations or offices. Allison De Marco, a postdoc at Pennsylvania State University, who is applying to be a protégé, says her big challenge is learning how to keep fellow postdocs interested while keeping up her own research.

Time constraints, money and institutional resistance can also be formidable challenges, says Reed. Many institutions worry that a postdoc organization will lead to a labour union demanding better pay and benefits. She says leaders need to learn how to communicate effectively with the administration.

"The best success stories come from postdoc associations working with faculty members to champion policies that improve housing subsidies, childcare and career development plans," says Reed. ■

Virginia Gewin

POSTDOC JOURNAL

Happily ever after?

He was a smart and successful scientist whose profile I had read on the Internet. We exchanged a few e-mails, and before I knew it, I was on a plane to meet him. I was so nervous I could hardly sleep. I saw where he worked, met his colleagues and was interviewed by his friends. After I flew home, I waited anxiously until he contacted me again.

Then we decided to move forward. Within weeks of finishing my doctorate, I left my family, my friends and my home in the United States to join him in London. I have been with him for one year now, for better or for worse, in good times and in bad... And he's not even my husband.

Choosing a postdoctoral mentor is like deciding on a life partner. You consider your similarities and differences, you decide what you bring to and want from the relationship, and you plan a future together. I changed my field from DNA repair to chromosome segregation, my model organism from mouse to yeast, and my country of residence from the United States to the United Kingdom.

After all, every good relationship entails hard work and sacrifice, as my husband (the real one) and I experienced when we both had to find postdocs in London. But how do you cope when it feels like the honeymoon is ending? One year into my postdoc, I am still striving for happily ever after. ■

Maria Ocampo-Hafalla is a research fellow at Cancer Research UK's London Research Institute.