

# MOVERS

**Stephen Cohen, director, Temasek Life Sciences Laboratory, Singapore**



**1996–present:** Coordinator, developmental-biology unit, European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL), Heidelberg, Germany

**1993–present:** Group leader, EMBL, Heidelberg, Germany

**1990–93:** Assistant investigator, Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, Texas

Geneticist Stephen Cohen eagerly anticipates taking his experience to yet another continent. Following stints in Europe and North America, Cohen will be heading to Asia as director of the non-profit Temasek Life Sciences Laboratory (TLL). During visits to Singapore, Cohen has been impressed with the working style of the city-state's growing science community. "I was very taken with the energy, excitement and enthusiasm of science in Asia, especially Singapore," he says.

Cohen goes to the five-year-old institute after serving as coordinator of the developmental-biology unit at the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) in Germany. The Canadian geneticist has long been interested in developmental biology and studying how cells form patterns to organize an animal body. After earning his PhD in biology at Princeton University in New Jersey in 1983, he worked for three years as a postdoctoral fellow at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the nearby Whitehead Institute. After another postdoc stint at the Max Planck Institute for Developmental Biology in Germany, he became an assistant professor and Howard Hughes Medical Institute assistant investigator at Baylor College of Medicine, Houston.

In 1993, Cohen became a group leader of EMBL and in 1996 the head of the newly formed developmental-biology unit. In addition to studying morphogen gradients and pattern formation, his team studies micro-RNAs and has identified genes that influence the control of metabolism and tissue growth. Cohen says he learned a lot from EMBL, which requires labs to be small, making frequent interdisciplinary interactions critical. "I hope to bring some of these approaches to TLL," he says. He also plans to bring his lab members to Singapore to continue his work.

Cohen will probably be expected to play a different role from that of the previous director, William Chia, who nurtured the fledgling institute by recruiting a number of high-quality scientists (see *Nature* 427, 660; 2004). Chia says he achieved his goal of assembling a multidisciplinary group of 25 labs and 210 researchers. These researchers, many in their early thirties, appreciate the atmosphere of transparency and collaboration, says Chia, as well as the energy of the place.

"TLL is a young, exciting place," says Cohen. "It will be my job to help it reach a high level of international recognition as the lab matures."

**Ichiko Fuyuno**

## NETWORKS & SUPPORT

### Crossing boundaries

Throughout my career I have always tried to resist the almost irreversible process of specialization and disciplinary parochialism triggered by the expansion of knowledge. A fortuitous encounter with a novel sort of fellowship has helped me do so. It's also helped me reflect on the impact that my work could have on society.

A graduate of University College London, I pursued my doctoral studies at the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) in Heidelberg, Germany. During those years, I recognized the need to frame the proceedings of science and their impact as part of a larger context. I pursued this aim by becoming a member of the EMBL Science and Society committee. When I began to search for postdoc opportunities, I looked for a formal way to embrace transdisciplinarity and to bridge science and society. Unfortunately, few funding organizations offered opportunities at my career stage.

Then, in 2003, Swiss entrepreneur Branco Weiss set up an innovative Society in Science fellowship to explore new avenues in the relationship between the two. It is aimed primarily at life-science postdocs seeking to incorporate novel social and cultural aspects into their work. Starting with a rigorous

scientific question related to their field, fellows are given the intellectual freedom to develop a sound transdisciplinary research agenda incorporating perspectives from areas such as the history and philosophy of science, sociology, anthropology, public health and law. Fellows receive support for up to five years and carry out projects at one or more institutions of their choice.

With this fellowship, I am now conducting research on behavioural neuroscience while carrying out sociological studies of the impact such experimentation has on society, with special focus on the growing use of psychopharmacological drugs. This has helped me be more critical of my own work and interact with scholars outside my own field.

Natural scientists often debate with social scientists or humanities scholars on important societal issues. But they rarely have much knowledge of each other's jargon and methods. This type of postdoctoral research offers the opportunity to merge two worlds into one unique experience — and to widen the prospects for a more stimulating career.

**Giovanni Frazzetto is a Branco Weiss fellow at EMBL in Monterotondo, Italy, and at the BIOS Centre of the London School of Economics.**

#### POSTDOC JOURNAL

### Missing the mundane

I'm coming to the conclusion that the real challenge with moving departments is not coping with the big changes, but dealing with all the little ones. I had expected, and prepared for, the fact that I'd be working for different people on a different project. As making those changes is often the reason you're moving in the first place, you embrace them.

It's the minutiae that get to me. It's hard for me to feel at home when I get lost every time I venture out onto campus, or when I don't know how the printers and photocopiers work. In my first week here I spent the better part of a day running around to three different offices (on opposite sides of the campus, naturally) trying to get registered. I'd yet to find that one person in the maze of bureaucracy who actually knows what's going on.

It's the same outside work, especially as I have moved to a new country. I'm having fun exploring, but most of the beer is cold and fizzy, I've yet to locate a reliable source of proper English cheddar, and I'm still auditioning for my new coffee haunt.

Knowing all those little things is what makes you feel that you are living in a place, rather than just visiting. I just hope that I get time to discover them all before I have to leave.

**Chris Rowan is a postdoctoral student in the geology department at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa.**