

TURNING POINT

Jacob Hanna

In April 2011, Jacob Hanna, currently a Genzyme postdoctoral fellow at the Whitehead Institute for Biomedical Research in Cambridge, Massachusetts, will start his own lab at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, Israel. As one of the few Palestinian researchers at the Weizmann, he is eager to build scientific bridges in the region.

Why did you choose to return to Israel to start your independent lab?

There were two major factors. The Weizmann is a great multidisciplinary centre that offers strong financial and organizational support. And on a personal level, as a Palestinian who grew up in Israel, it is meaningful to do science there.

Do you plan to encourage more scientific exchange between regions?

I am a scientist, and research is my priority. But building a diverse group of students and collaborators at the Weizmann is one way to have a positive impact. Palestinians are underrepresented in academia, in part because there is little academic infrastructure in the area outside Israel, and if I can encourage Israeli and Palestinian scientists to join my lab and work in an integrative environment, I will be happy.

You have focused on stem-cell research projects with a high risk of failure. Why?

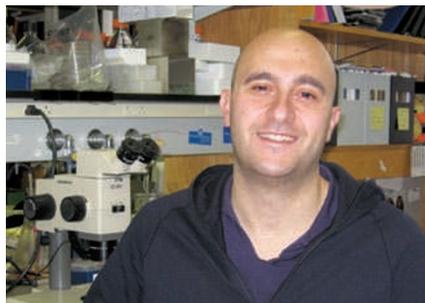
The Whitehead has a risk-taking culture. My mentor, Rudolf Jaenisch, encourages us to take on high-risk ideas and not to be constrained by technical limitations. That support taught me to work hard and be adventurous. He also tells us not to lower standards by overlooking complexity. In this field, there is a tendency to rely on concepts that are not yet well defined. I'm realizing how important it is to do quantitative experiments to get conclusive answers.

Is media attention affecting stem-cell research?

It is a double-edged sword. I'm happy that the importance of stem cells has been recognized. But I'm concerned that media attention may be directing the science by encouraging scientists to publish too early. I worry that this rush lowers standards.

What was your best career decision?

I did an MD-PhD at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Towards the end of my studies, I realized that I enjoyed medicine



and research, but would be better at research. So I focused on that instead of doing a residency. I'm glad I have my medical degree. It gives me a different view of research. For example, as a physician, I'm interested in type I autoimmune diabetes and genetic susceptibilities. With stem cells, we can ask questions about how to humanize mouse models of this disease to understand its genesis.

Any missed opportunities you regret?

No. In fact, I'm glad I passed on an early opportunity to start my own lab after one year of my postdoc. I was fortunate that my research went well in that first year, but I realized I would be rushing. I know it is time now, because I have a much better grasp of the important questions and I feel confident that I have gained enough experience and maturity to handle any scientific situation.

What questions will you ask at the Weizmann?

I want to understand the continuum of reprogramming cells to pluripotency. But I also want to develop a new avenue of research — disease-specific stem-cell research. I want to use technology to ask basic immunology questions and develop human models. My first challenge will be to forge collaborations throughout Israel, to lay the foundation for my future research.

What inspires your work?

Mostly it is the work of others. When I read somebody else's great paper, even in another field, I want to do something similar — come up with a new idea that will make a contribution. What drives me is good scientific work.

What is your career philosophy?

Work hard and never admire your own science. It can always be better. ■

INTERVIEW BY VIRGINIA GEWIN

TRAINING

Website to help women

An interactive website aims to halt attrition among female doctoral students in science, technology, engineering and maths. Launched on 4 November by Arizona State University (ASU) in Tempe, CareerWISE (go.nature.com/nbs6qv) gives coaching and support to help women overcome hostile environments and balance priorities. Content includes videos of female scientists who have cleared graduate-school hurdles. The site seeks to help women develop coping strategies, says project leader Bianca Bernstein, an ASU psychologist. Her research on discrimination among female graduate students who felt unable to seek support from colleagues helped inspire the site. Two National Science Foundation grants totalling US\$3.2 million funded the site.

EUROPE

Universities ranked

University College London (UCL) tops a list of biology programmes at 130 high-performing universities in Europe, says a report released on 27 October by the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHE), a non-profit group in Gütersloh, Germany. As part of an effort to promote educational reform, the CHE assessed universities' biology, chemistry and physics programmes. It measured the institutions' number of publications, citations and outstanding researchers; student and staff mobility; presence of Marie Curie fellows and other programmes; and whether researchers had a European Research Council grant or Nobel prize. UCL did well in all categories except mobility.

TENURE

Satisfaction survey

A Harvard University group has initiated a survey to gauge the satisfaction of tenured faculty members in relation to research, teaching and other activities. Harvard's Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, began its pilot phase in October, following efforts to track the satisfaction of tenure-track staff. "Tenured faculty are key to institutional climate, the most important thing for tenure-track faculty," says COACHE director Kiernan Mathews. Topics will include recognition, work-life balance, retention policies and time for duties such as research and teaching. COACHE plans to launch the full survey by autumn 2011.