

# Otmar Wiestler

Known for his drive and ability to drum up synergy, Otmar Wiestler is the natural choice to lead Germany's largest cancer research center. But can this non-clinician transform translational cancer research?

Otmar Wiestler isn't a typical scientist—some might even say he's a drifter. Among his colleagues, he is not famous for any one area of research. During his 20 years as a scientist, he has dabbled in such fields as chemical carcinogenesis, tumor pathology, epilepsy and stem cells. For many scientists, such a lack of focus can mean the difference between greatness and mediocrity. Wiestler, however, has spun his many interests into an asset. "He's a genius at organizing science," says Johannes Schramm, head of the department of neurosurgery at the University of Bonn Medical Center.

No one was surprised, except for Wiestler himself, when he got a phone call last August from the president of the Helmholtz Association inviting him to become the new director of one of its research centers—the prestigious Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum (DKFZ), Germany's largest cancer research center. Wiestler accepted the position almost immediately—highly unusual in Germany, where negotiations for higher salaries and better benefits often go on for months. After 11 years as head of neuropathology at the University of Bonn Medical Center, he now says, he was simply "ready for the change."

With an annual operating budget of €125 million, the DKFZ is one of Germany's largest basic research institutions. The institute's research is highly regarded within Europe, and one of its primary missions is to transfer research insights to the clinic, says Peter Lange, chair of the agency's board of trustees. The board chose Wiestler because he had done an incredible job at his former position, Lange says. "Wiestler was a dynamic force," Lange adds. "He pushed for new high-quality people and restructured the entire department—he was our man."

When Wiestler first arrived in Bonn, a fire a few years earlier had left nothing there but a burned-out building and a flailing neuropathology department. "Wiestler turned it into one of the leading neuropathology institutes in Germany and one of the best in Europe," says Paul Kleihues at the University of Zürich. "And he did it all in 10 years."

Wiestler had previously worked with Kleihues in Zürich for six years, where Kleihues had developed a brain tumor reference center to which pathologists could send biopsies. When Kleihues left Zürich to head the International Agency for Research on Cancer in 1994, the center was transferred to Bonn. Wiestler turned it into one of the most authoritative tumor reference centers in the world, with 3,000 referred cases each year.

Among Wiestler's other major accomplishments in Bonn was the establishment of two large regional collaborative research programs—one centered on the molecular basis of human brain disorders and the other on temporal lobe epilepsy—with grants from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, the German research council. The projects are ongoing but have already led to the first classification of genes involved in childhood medulloblastomas, and to a new treatment for spinal muscular atrophy. "These grants are very competitive and the collaborations are very difficult to establish," Kleihues says. "The medical faculty at Bonn was not very successful at getting these grants until Wiestler came along."

Wiestler's drive to build skyscrapers out of hardscrabble didn't stop there. Along with Oliver Brüstle, a colleague who heads the Institute for Reconstructive Neurobiology in Bonn, Wiestler also established a new institute called the Life and Brain Company. The center's purpose is to commercialize research that comes out of the Bonn campuses, says

Brüstle. "We want to steer the research towards applications from the start," he says. "This is a novel concept in Germany." The building for the new institute is scheduled to be complete by the end of the year.

Wiestler intends to continue working with Brüstle, but he is more eager to dig into the task at hand. Over the next five years, more than 20 of the DKFZ's 60 department heads will retire, giving him a unique opportunity to reshape the agency's research. "Clinically the entire cancer field is quite frustrating. There's a lot of excitement about research but we have very little advances on the clinical side, especially in the neurology field," Wiestler says. "I would like to turn this center into a driving force for developing novel diagnostic and therapeutic applications without neglecting basic cancer research."

Wiestler has never directly worked with patients, but his colleagues constantly remind him of their plight. "I was accusing him all the time," says Schramm, who is a neurosurgeon. "I used to tell him, 'You are sitting upstairs looking only at your genes but you never ask how long the patients live.' I think now he understands that working with the practitioners who handle patients every day is also an important way of treating cancer."

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One of Wiestler's priorities at the new position is to jumpstart the agency's research on diagnostic microarrays, which can identify tumors that will respond to existing treatments. He also wants to focus on therapies that selectively induce apoptosis in cancer cells. Wiestler says he's thrilled that the institute already has a plan for Germany's first Comprehensive Cancer Center, which will take an interdisciplinary approach to cancer treatment and research. Doctors from all cancer disciplines will evaluate each patient, and clinicians will work closely with basic researchers all within the same facility. There's a lot of overlap in medicine, Wiestler says. "Great ideas come out of collaborations."

Wiestler's task is huge by anyone's measure, but he is undaunted. "Life is always a challenge," he says. Others are equally optimistic about his performance and say he is unlikely to sink into the administrative swamp that often accompanies such positions. "Wiestler is very organized," says Brüstle. "I've seen him driving while dictating into a recorder."

"He is also very disciplined," adds Schramm. "In fact when he had a beer, I would take out my calendar and write, 'Otmar had a beer, something must be wrong'"

Asked if he is worried about any aspect of his new job, Wiestler lets out an emphatic "no." He then pauses, rocks back in his chair, runs his fingers through his hair and says intensely, "There's only one real threat in life, and that is a major disease that affects yourself or your family. It's a disaster—anything else is manageable."

*Gunjan Sinha, Heidelberg*