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Novartis expands academic research funding

Undaunted by the controversy over its $50 million deal to fund agricultural research at the University of California at Berkeley (UCB) a year ago, the Swiss company Novartis has recently announced a $24 million agreement with the University of Maryland School of Medicine to develop new treatments for schizophrenia.

As part of the Maryland deal, Novartis Pharma AG scientists will work on joint planning and research teams with university researchers. The company's ultimate goal is to "access well diagnosed human brain tissue from their tissue banks and some of their expertise in proteomics," according to Paul Herrling, head of Novartis Pharma Research. And, he adds, "We will have the right to commercially exploit the results as new therapies in mental health."

A similar agreement, which gave the company's Agricultural Discovery Institute in La Jolla first rights to a portion of the genomics research conducted at UCB's Department of Plant and Microbial Biology, spurred protest from some students and staff last year over the ability of Novartis-funded academics to remain scientifically independent (*Nature* **396**, 5; 1998). At about the same time, Novartis confronted discussions on a moratorium on xenotransplantation and a vote on banning gene technology and transgenic animals back home in Switzerland. It was this atmosphere that led the company to consider cutting its Swiss research budget in favor of spending elsewhere.

Since then, "issues have been solved very satisfactorily," says Herrling. "Following the very positive outcome of the vote on gene technology in Switzerland last year...we have resumed our investment in Swiss universities." Nonetheless, he admits that the company's largest research center, located in Basel, which employs almost 4,000-people, has reached maximum capacity. Hence, although the company will continue to invest in the center to maintain its status, Herrling says, "we do not foresee expanding it further," whereas "research will grow both in the US and UK."

The latest deal will funnel millions of dollars into the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center (MPRC) over six years. Noting that "There has been no major breakthrough in treating schizophrenia since anti-psychotic medications were introduced 45 years ago," MPRC director William Carpenter says, "This agreement will give us the resources to gain a better understanding of the disease and go on to develop and test new approaches."

According to Herrling, the research will include, "the development of novel models of schizophrenia, by identifying protein and gene abnormalities in the brain, and by testing concepts with brain imaging techniques."

Victor D. Chase, New York

Women gain ground on men in PhD passes

Compared with their relatively poor achievement rate a decade ago, women at American universities are closing the gap on men when it comes to PhD qualifications. Whereas the number of men awarded doctorates in the biological sciences in 1997 increased by 30% over 1987 levels to 3,220, the number of women attaining this degree level rose by 82% over the same period. But in absolute numbers, there were still 1,124 more male than female PhD recipients in the biological sciences.

One research discipline that has seen one of the largest increases in women doctorates is neuroscience, with an almost-300% increase during the decade. However, the same data shows that the overall percentage of both men and women entering R&D after their PhD study years has declined from 56% in 1987 to 41.5% in 1997 for men, and from 36% to 30% for women. The data were compiled by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago from the "Survey of Earned Doctorates"—an annual census of all research doctorates granted by approximately 400 US institutions each year.

Karen Birmingham, London

Medical records ruling should not hamper research

A new set of rules aimed at protecting Americans' medical information is unlikely to interfere with legitimate basic and clinical research. "For the average researcher in an academic medical center, this isn't going to change things," says Doug Peddicord, a policy analyst with the Washington DC-based American Federation of Medical Research. The rules were issued four weeks ago by the Clinton

Administration after Congress missed a self-imposed deadline to come up with a law to protect medical records from inappropriate snooping.

The rules take effect in February 2000, after a public comment period, and insurers, hospitals, physicians, and others who handle medical records will have two years to comply. Criminal and financial penalties can be levied on miscreants.

Patients can give consent for use of their information if they so wish, but otherwise, the rules apply to all electronic records. Paper records and non-identifiable information are not covered.

But if research involves a review of medical records, or data within those records that's identifiable, the investigator has to seek approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB), or an equivalent entity established specifically to review privacy matters, says Peddicord.

To grant a consent waiver, an IRB will determine if the research cannot be done without identifiable information; if the research is of sufficient importance to outweigh the privacy intrusion; and that there are plans to protect identifiable information from improper use or disclosure, and to destroy the identifiers as soon as feasible.

Peddicord views the rules positively, saying they will enhance federal protection over all research, not just that conducted by government-funded scientists. "This actually extends, and in some ways improves the protections of the Common Rule over research that's essentially unregulated now," he says. However, the rules still could be amended by Congress. And state laws that are more stringent on privacy issues will not be superseded by these federal rules.

Alicia Ault, Washington DC

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