MOLECULAR BIOLOGY

Roche Institute Moves West

Scientists at the Roche Institute of Molecular Biology (IMB) in Nutley, New Jersey, were shocked to learn this week that a major shake-up will close their renowned research center and nudge some of its leaders into early retirement. The institute, established in 1967 by the Swiss pharmaceutical giant Hoffmann-La Roche to support open-ended studies in biology, has made significant contributions to basic science, including the cloning of interferon, pioneering work in neuroscience, and groundbreaking work on human taste sensation and the regulation of plant fungi. But many senior members of the 160-person staff say they're now making plans to relocate, retire, or find new work. "The place is in turmoil," says one widely published staffer who asked not to be identified.

The upheaval follows a decision last May by the parent company, Roche Holding Company of Basel, Switzerland, to purchase Syntex Corp. of Palo Alto, California. Roche paid $5.3 billion for Syntex, perhaps best known as the developer of birth control pills. Roche hopes to complete the merger this fall; the company has said it expects to eliminate about 5000 jobs from its global operations.

According to a half-dozen senior researchers at the institute, Jürgen Drews, Hoffmann-La Roche's president for international research and development, passed the word in October that IMB would be folding its tent. And a memo by Drews dated 1 November confirms it: Roche intends to eliminate 540 jobs at its Nutley campus, including the IMB staff. "We plan to relocate" IMB to the Syntex campus in Palo Alto, the memo says, and "rebuild it in the new location with a strong scientific focus on genomic sciences as they relate to multifactorial diseases." Staffers believe the company plans to recruit new researchers in California and that it may try to establish ties with Stanford University. A top candidate for the center's new director is rumored to be Stanford geneticist David Botstein.

Drews and institute Director Herbert Weissbach were both involved last week in a gala dedication of a new, multidisciplinary science building at Hoffmann-La Roche's U.S. headquarters in Nutley and did not respond to phone messages. (The $100-million center, separate from IMB, was in the works long before Roche began to consider shutting down IMB.)

Former IMB Director Aaron Shatkin, now director of the Center for Advanced Biotechnology and Medicine at Rutgers University, said he first learned of the impending demise of IMB several weeks ago, but, in retrospect, the "writing was on the wall" as early as 1992. He recalls that Drews made a "pointed statement" in an address at an IMB anniversary celebration that Roche's research was likely to become more targeted in the future. Sidney Pestka, who led interferon studies while at IMB and is now at Rutgers, says he also heard about plans to move the institute and finds it "shocking that the place where so many of us grew up in molecular biology" may be coming to an end.

IMB staffers say Roche has already interviewed several candidates to serve as director of the new research center. They include Thomas Caskey of the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Botstein of Stanford, Daniel Cohen of the Centre d'Etude du Polymorphisme Humain in Paris, and Richard Myers, a geneticist and associate professor at Stanford. Caskey, who turned down the offer a few weeks ago in favor of a job at Merck & Co. (*Science*, 28 October, p. 538), couldn't be reached for comment. Bostein, Cohen, and Myers said they had visited IMB and given talks recently. Myers declined to comment further. Cohen said he had visited "not as a candidate but as an adviser." And Botstein confirmed that the company has been talking to him about moving to Palo Alto and possibly associating with Stanford.

HOFFMANN-LA ROCHE

Elbow room. Roche's New Jersey campus gains a new building, but loses researchers.

–Eliot Marshall

ADVISING THE PRESIDENT

PCAST Plunges Into Its Work

Midway through its inaugural meeting last week, the President's Committee of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST) ran into a stark political reality: The 18-member panel has gotten off to such a late start that it barely has time to influence the budget that will take effect one month before the next presidential election. That realization occurred when John Gibbons, co-chair of the committee and director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, told the group—whose members he had sworn in only a few hours earlier—that its first project must be completed by April 1995 to have any impact on the 1997 budget. "We're being asked to think long-term, but to do our first report in 3 or 4 months," remarked PCAST member John Holdren, professor of energy policy at the University of California, Berkeley.

Faced with that daunting and contradictory prospect, the committee used much of its one-and-a-half-day meeting to map out a strategy for focusing on concise, near-term topics while reserving time for a broader look at long-term science policy issues. The committee agreed to a three-pronged approach. Its first step will be to look over the strategic plans being drawn up by each of the nine committees that make up the new National Science and Technology Council (*Science*, 17 September 1993, p. 1513). These plans, due in mid-December, are meant to coordinate the government's $72-billion R&D portfolio. The second is to offer short-term advice, in the form of reports by ad hoc subgroups, on the scientific aspects of such issues as health care reform, education, and other topics high on next year's congressional agenda. And finally, in the tradition of previous presidential scientific advisory bodies, the group will grapple with such perennial issues as nuclear nonproliferation, environmental protection, investment policy, and international cooperation.

For his part, Gibbons made it clear that he intends to use PCAST members, individually and in small groups, to help his office grapple with the myriad scientific issues that the Administration faces—as well as convening the entire committee a few times a year to discuss long-range policies. He also wants their input to be pragmatic: Several times last week, in the midst of animated discussions about poor schools, rates of poverty, global conflict, and other intractable problems, Gibbons would interrupt to remind committee members, "You're here to provide advice to the president. Where does that issue fit on the president's agenda?"

One major element missing from the committee's inaugural meeting was the man they are supposed to be advising. PCAST did meet privately for 75 minutes with Vice President Al Gore, who was pinch-hitting for his boss, who was on a whirlwind diplomatic tour of the Middle East. But PCAST co-chair John Young, former president and chief executive officer of Hewlett-Packard, said there's no substitute for face-to-face contact with the chief. "If we're a presidential panel, we should meet with the president," said Young, promising to work "very hard" to arrange such a meeting when PCAST reconvenes in February.

–Jeffrey Mervis