

Q&A

Pierluigi Nicotera is the founding director of the new German Centre for Neurodegenerative Diseases in Bonn, Germany.



What do you hope to accomplish at the centre?

We want to promote clinical and fundamental research in neurodegenerative disease as well as in public health. The core centre is in Bonn with other locations throughout the country. As director of the centre, I cannot micromanage individual projects, but I will decide the strategy and priority of the programmes together with the leaders of each individual location. Overall, I will be responsible for the centre's scientific delivery and more directly for the activities at the Bonn site, which also comprises the Cologne and Jülich locations.

Have you been interested in neurodegenerative disease for a long time?

When I was quite young, I was captivated by the idea of man on the Moon. The popular dream of most every child in the 1950s and 60s was to become an astrophysicist. But as we grow up, there are other influences. The father of a school friend was a doctor who treated patients with

Parkinson's disease, and no one knew then what caused it or what genetic mutations were involved. I became fascinated, initially by stroke and, more recently, by the mechanisms that underlie neurodegenerative disease and how the connections between neurons are affected.

What are the key findings of your research thus far?

I began formulating the reasons for cell death and clarified the mechanism that causes calcium to be lethal for cells, which led to discoveries of fundamental processes in cells.

Were you surprised to be offered this position?

I had heard that this centre was being created and that they were looking for a director, but it wasn't until late last year that the offer materialized from the German Ministry of Education and Research. I thought it was a unique opportunity because there is tremendous funding for research, up to €66 million (US\$91 million) a year.

Each site is already well recognized for excellent science, so the centre can count on a high-profile group of scientists.

What motivates you in your work?

There is a continuous challenge to cure human illness. When I go to bed I think, 'What did I do today? Did I help anyone to progress?' With neurodegenerative diseases, we ask, 'When will we have a new drug?' Developing new treatments takes a long time. The idea of progress — going forward and discovering new things, never standing still — is central for me.

Do you have a secret for scientific success?

What's the definition of success? Winning the Nobel Prize? Making a new medicine? It's difficult to say. I would propose that it depends on the degree of happiness and satisfaction the scientific work gives to an individual, and I am very happy in what I do. ■

Interview by Karen Kaplan

POSTDOC JOURNAL

The simple life



I became a biologist because I wanted to travel to exotic places and save endangered species. This may not be the ideal place for such an admission, but there it is — my own inconvenient truth. Although this was the naive notion of a working-class adolescent, unacquainted with academia, I have been lucky enough to travel from Outer Mongolia to the Outer Hebrides to work on fascinating species — from voles, to pikas, to Tasmanian devils.

Now I find myself the full-time mom of a three-year-

old; my field-work wings clipped. My husband Brett has the postdoc and gets to see the cool stuff — coyotes, bobcats, salamanders and rattlesnakes. But motherhood has its benefits. I get to spend my days bouncing on giant inflatable castles with my son Kai, splashing around in the fun pool and hiking the trails of San Francisco Bay in search of snails, squirrels and fox poop.

Some days I would gladly trade toddler-dom for sampling parasitized frogs with Brett, but this forced distance from academia has helped me realize

that, somewhere along the winding road of my career, I lost sight of my reasons for studying biology in the first place. With the help of Kai and the snails, I am starting to see the natural world as I did when I was a kid — all the wonder, all the possibilities. I know I still want to be a biologist when I grow up. ■

Joanne Isaac is a postdoc studying the effect of climate change on biodiversity at James Cook University in Townsville, Australia. She is now in the United States so that her husband can complete a postdoc.

IN BRIEF

Competitive edge

Four US federal legislators want the nation's National Academies to identify how its research universities can remain internationally competitive. In a 22 June letter, Senators Barbara Mikulski (Democrat, Maryland) and Lamar Alexander (Republican, Tennessee) and Representatives Bart Gordon (Democrat, Tennessee) and Ralph Hall (Republican, Texas) ask the academies to assess universities' organizational, intellectual and financial capacity and their collaborations with other national research groups. Academies spokesperson Sara Frueh said the organization's leaders will now discuss how to conduct such a study.

Brain research

Stanford University's School of Medicine in California has received a US\$10-million grant over five years from the National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda, Maryland, to help establish and operate a Silvio O. Conte Center for Neuroscience Research. The new centre, in Palo Alto, will focus on studying neuroplasticity, or the capacity of the brain to change as a result of experience. Robert Malenka, the Stanford professor of psychiatry and behavioural science who will direct the centre, said he expects the grant to support 14 to 18 researchers, including postdocs, and hopes the centre will begin operating this autumn. Conte Centres are typically set up to operate for ten years.

Green economy

Green jobs will be key for economic recovery, says a report from the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Washington DC. The report, released in collaboration with the Worldwatch Institute, also in Washington DC, says that a green economy will help to battle climate change and drive job growth. At the 23 June report launch, Jürgen Trittin, a member of the German Parliament, said that clean-tech investment in Germany had created 120,000 jobs in the past three years. Michael Peck, head of wind-turbine manufacturer Gamesa in Alava, Spain, said that the US wind-power sector already employs more people than the coal industry. However, some analysts have noted that incentives to encourage green jobs may eliminate more jobs than they create (see *Nature* 459, 1156; 2009).