

TURNING POINT

Ben Lehner

As an early-career scientist, Ben Lehner got swept up in the explosion of genomics-related research. Now at the Centre for Genomic Regulation (CRG) in Barcelona, Spain, working with the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL), he won the 2013 Eppendorf Young Investigator Award for teasing apart the relationships between genotypes and phenotypes. Despite fragile funding, he finds the Barcelona science scene to be vibrant.

You trained in Cambridge, UK. What was that like in the early genomics era?

There was a can-do attitude. It felt like a historic time. During my last undergraduate year at the University of Cambridge, the first draft of the human genome sequence was released. I joined a genomics lab, and worked on mapping human protein interactions. But I got frustrated — it's difficult to cleanly manipulate human genes.

You moved on to the nematode *Caenorhabditis elegans*. What research did that allow?

The *C. elegans* community had built a genome-wide RNA interference library to knock down any gene. It opened my eyes; it was much easier to do experiments. My postdoc lab at the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute near Cambridge, systematically looked at genetic interactions. This crazy, manual screening experiment was set up as a factory and took several months.

You next applied to the CRG. What was the interview process like?

I was used to Anglo-American-style interviews, which are one-on-one, but this was more like the German system, with many candidates in front of a big panel. I didn't get particularly good feedback and didn't hear anything for a few weeks — until the offer.

How did you know it would be a good move?

When I went to the CRG and saw people moving from the United States and Germany, I knew it was a unique, world-class institute in a city of creative people — a place that I would want to live in. And it has a non-tenure-track system so junior groups are not competing. But investigators are supposed to stay for nine years at most.

When is your time up?

Officially, very soon. I have been here seven years now. Unofficially, I want to stay.

How might you make a case for staying?

I will say that I want to stay if it's a possibility. My group's work is central to the interests of this institute, so that is in my favour. But at the end



of the day, it will come down to whether they have space for another senior person. In general, I support a non-tenured system because it brings in new ideas. But it would be a disaster if every institute tried to follow this model.

You have described Barcelona's funding as strong but fragile. How so?

The regional government of Catalonia has done a much better job of protecting research budgets than the national government during the economic downturn, and this regional funding is the main source of income for institutes such as the CRG. Science funding from Spain's government has gone down in recent years, but the regional government is protecting it as best it can.

Is your funding secure?

At the CRG, in theory, you do not have to rely on external grants. But there is pressure to bring in funds if you want a larger lab. However, even if I keep getting money, I can't keep expanding. The institute's goal is not to grow empires but to have more groups that do a few things well.

Will you be looking for US opportunities?

I'm not sure. The United States is not particularly attractive right now because the funding success rate is so low. My friends there are having a difficult time. Lots of people are moving back to Europe or to China. But it has to be kept in perspective. The United States still has enormous numbers of fantastically funded groups.

How do you make the big career decisions?

I find that the really important decisions in life are never made in a rational way. They just feel right and you go with it. It is the smaller decisions that get made rationally. ■

INTERVIEW BY VIRGINIA GEWIN