

naturejobs

**JOBS OF
THE WEEK**

Life in a government laboratory can be pretty good. For a start, the money tends to be above average, and job security is usually fairly assured. On top of that, employees are free from the everyday administrative and teaching duties that they are saddled with at universities. All of this makes a career at a government lab sound quite appealing — but the institutions do vary from country to country, and even those with a high profile can sometimes find themselves on the back foot.

Over the next two weeks, *Naturejobs* takes a look at two government labs — the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico (see page 220) and the institutes run by the UK Medical Research Council (MRC; see next week's issue). Although there are many similarities between the labs, including a strong history of landmark discoveries, there are also significant differences. The size of research groups tends to be smaller in Britain, for example, and national security concerns have had serious repercussions at Los Alamos.

Indeed, as well as the need to adapt to the changing face of nuclear-weapons research, Los Alamos has found itself embarrassed by a series of security lapses. These, in turn, have led to changes in management, revamped procedures and, ultimately, a degree of staff attrition. Researchers at the lab may not have teaching duties, but they do have a veritable mountain of forms to fill out. But despite its recent problems, Los Alamos is still lauded for its interdisciplinary, cutting-edge research, high number of potential collaborators and ample resources — so it should be possible for the management and staff to restore its lost lustre.

But perhaps the major challenge facing both Los Alamos and the MRC is the quest for talent. Although government labs offer good salaries, the private sector — whether pharmaceutical companies, biotechnology firms or Internet companies — often offers even better. Prestigious labs such as Los Alamos or those run by the MRC have their perks and attractions, but even they must strive constantly to find the people and research that will keep their decades-old reputations intact.

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