Translational globe-trotting

By Steve Edelson, Executive Editor

Six like-minded translational research centers have partnered to help speed the commercialization of academic research. The international cadre, dubbed the **Global Alliance of Leading Drug Discovery and Development Centres**, comprises more than 400 drug developers working on at least 165 projects.

The origin of the Global Alliance dates to 2010, when **The Centre for Drug Research and Development** (CDRD) in Canada began to look for other translational research organizations with which to potentially partner.

"There really are only a handful of organizations that have fully integrated drug discovery and development platforms, including infrastructure, expertise in industrial drug development and a mandate in the preclinical translational space," said CDRD president and CEO Karimah Es Sabar.

Es Sabar had started talks with Belgium's **Centre for Drug Design and Discovery**, Germany's **Lead Discovery Center GmbH** and **The Scripps Research Institute's Scripps Florida** drug discovery center.

The final pieces fell into place last year when Mike Johnson, director of corporate partnerships at **MRC Technology**, read an article about CDRD and how it receives funding from the Canadian federal government, the provincial governments of British Columbia and Alberta, and a handful of pharma companies.

"I got in touch with their CEO and said we should be talking," noted Johnson. "We're expanding and are looking to be global, and I liked their model. We met with CDRD in Europe and it was astounding—their slide presentation was virtually the same as ours."

MRC Technology (MRCT) began life as the internal technology transfer company of the **Medical Research Council**, which is the U.K.'s largest publicly funded biomedical research organization. MRCT became independent in 2000, although the vast majority of its business came from MRC for the next decade.

Since 2010, however, MRCT has been searching for assets elsewhere. Now, about 70%–80% of its projects are non-MRC. For example, MRCT last year partnered with the **Shanghai Institute of Biochemistry and Cell Biology**, which is part of the **Chinese Academy of Sciences**. The institute is providing therapeutic targets, which can be further developed at MRCT's Centre for Therapeutics Discovery.¹

"We've been looking globally for good science, and we now have more projects than we can handle," said Mike Johnson, director of corporate partnerships at MRCT. "The question was whether we could prioritize and share these projects. Now, we've pulled in global organizations to push the science forward."

At the meeting with CDRD, MRCT found out that CDRD was discussing a potential alliance with the other translational centers. "We decided to pull together and create this alliance," added Johnson.

The resulting Global Alliance also includes drug discovery center also includes **Cancer Research UK's Cancer Research Technology Ltd.** commercial arm.

Conversion rates

The overarching goal of the alliance is to help accelerate the conversion of early stage research into drugs. Johnson also said the alliance should help increase the international visibility of each member. "Some are only really seen well nationally," he noted.

The organization's success metrics include the number of spinouts from academic collaborators, the number of deals between the alliance's academic collaborators and biotech or pharma companies and the number of patents granted to the alliance's collaborators in academia.

Johnson told *SciBX* that he wants the alliance to "be demonstrating new models of drug discovery in the next two years. There's an absolute need for pharma to access innovation in academia, and we can act as a catalyst."

The Global Alliance does not charge its members any fees—each organization shoulders its own costs.

A steering committee consisting of one representative per member manages the Global Alliance. The chair of the committee rotates every year. The committee expects to meet two times annually, and decisions will be based on majority votes, including other organizations' applications to join the alliance.

A key condition for joining the Global Alliance is integration—meaning a would-be member needs to have in place the full spectrum of drug discovery and development capabilities.

Those criteria, according to the alliance website, will differentiate it from "upcoming, not fully integrated, purely academic drug discovery initiatives, or contract research organizations."

Es Sabar said the Global Alliance also hopes to tackle large-scale projects that are beyond the scope of a single translational center. She declined to provide specifics but noted there will be at least one "massive initiative that will be a joint initiative between the centers. It's very much needed, and none of us could do it on our own."

Edelson, S. *SciBX* 6(4); doi:10.1038/scibx.2013.78
Published online Jan. 31, 2013

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COMPANIES AND INSTITUTIONS MENTIONED

Cancer Research Technology Ltd., London, U.K.
Cancer Research UK, Cambridge, U.K.
Centre for Drug Design and Discovery, Leuven, Belgium
The Centre for Drug Research and Development, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China
Global Alliance of Leading Drug Discovery and Development

Centres, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
Lead Discovery Center GmbH, Dortmund, Germany
Medical Research Council, London, U.K.
MRC Technology, London, U.K.
Scripps Florida, Jupiter, Fla.
The Scripps Research Institute, La Jolla, Calif.
Shanghai Institute of Biochemistry and Cell Biology, Shanghai, China