

Pharmaceutical industry as service supplier

The Other Way Around

Typically, pharmaceutical companies fish for biotech companies to acquire specialist knowledge or technology. GlaxoSmithKline in Germany operates in reverse: its Genetics Research Centre (GRC) in Munich offers genotyping services to scientists.

At first glance the invitation from GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) to a press conference in Munich earlier this year wasn't thrilling. A new collaboration between GSK's Genetics Research Centre (GRC) and the Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy of the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU) München was to be announced.

However, at second reading, the story contained interesting details: the GRC offers a SNP genotyping service to the worldwide scientific community. In other words, a pharmaceutical giant is offering its services to basic science. That is new.

The GRC itself is hardly spanking new. It was founded in 2002 in collaboration with two Max Planck Institutes in Munich. That relationship broke down with no explanation from GSK scientists.

Last year, the GRC moved to rooms in the respected century-old Kraepelin building, home of the Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy. Where Alois Alzheimer once worked, high-tech mass spectrometers are now genotyping DNA samples. Four employees manage 600,000 SNPs per week if their machines work to capacity.

Murky motives

Thomas Werner, Managing Director of GSK Germany until June 2008, explains why the company moved to the University, "Effective pooling of available resources in academia and industry allows for the implementation of multidisciplinary research endeavors. The collaboration established between the Munich-based Clinic and Polyclinic for Psychiatry and Psychotherapy at the LMU and GlaxoSmithKline here in Munich may serve here as an example. In this partnership, LMU contributes its many years of clinical experience to the field. This is complemented by the contributions of the Genetics Research Centre run by GlaxoSmithKline, which brings its powerful high-throughput genotyping technology to bear." (Despite repeated enquiries, the *Lab Times* reporter didn't get a clearer explanation.)

The collaboration's objective is to identify new genetic risk factors for schizophrenia. "We urgently need to better understand this disease because in Germany alone, 800,000 people are suffering from this disease", says Werner. That almost equals the population of Amsterdam.



Photo: LMU

Where Alois Alzheimer once worked: Glaxo's Genetic Research Centre (GRC) is located in the century-old Kraepelin building in Munich, home of the Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy.

But the GRC isn't just the genotyping arm of the LMU; its doors are open to the whole scientific community. The GRC team would tackle any problem from any life science discipline that could be solved with SNP genotyping in high resolution. Plant geneticists can use the GRC's services as well as microbiologists and evo-devo scientists.

The GRC is a non-profit making company that will stay in the red, dependent on financial support from GSK. "The company is not created to make profit", says Werner. Though he's sure that the "GRC is [...] a living proof that modern research can happen within the boundary of Europe."

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Photo: GSK

Thomas Werner, GSK Germany, didn't explain clearly why his company is spending so much money.