

World's largest patent offices to enhance collaboration

Fighting Time Wasters

Unnecessary duplication of work is something your *Lab Times* reporter hates with a passion. When it comes to applying for a patent, such frustration is par for the course – just think of the complicated and often conflicting procedures at different patent offices in, say, Japan, Europe and the USA. Thus, everyone should applaud when the five largest patent agencies announce plans to, “enhance patent examination efficiency and quality, as well as to guarantee the stability of patent rights and to standardise information between [their] offices”. In late 2008, the patent offices of Europe (EPO), Korea (KIPO), China (SIPO), Japan (JPO) and the US (USPTO), the “IP5”, did exactly that: They promised measures to tackle together a range of problems in the worldwide patent system, such as:

- to address the redundancy of patent searches and examinations, which is weathering lengthy backlogs;
- to compile a common documentation database designed to assist prior art searches;
- to develop protocols for a common application format and common access to search and examination results; and
- to overcome language barriers.

This April, the heads of the IP5 met in Guilin, China, to talk about their 2008 promise (they call it “vision”), “expressing their willingness to explore appropriate ways to speed up the process”.

Sounds good. Your *Lab Times* reporter is hopeful that the bureaucrats will do their very best to succeed, but whether they pull it off remains to be seen. And you can't help wondering why all those top-ranking officials thought it necessary to waste time travelling to the Far East just for a simple announcement. -WK-



Wellcome Trust (UK) extends drug discovery funds

Seeding Early Stages



A British medical charity, the Wellcome Trust, recently announced an additional €132 million to extend its “Seeding Drug Discovery” (SDD) initiative for a further five years. SDD, launched

in 2005, is to facilitate early-stage small-molecule drug discovery that is considered too high-risk to attract funding from commercial sources. In its first period, about €95 million was distributed to researchers at public and private institutions, including commercial companies (more information at www.wellcome.ac.uk/Funding/Technology-transfer/Awards/Seeding-Drug-Discovery). -WK-

Pharnext (France) raises funding money

Will New Mixtures Help?

Pharnext (Paris), a three-year-old company that develops new combinations of registered drugs for treating neurological diseases (“Pleodrugs”), has raised €4.8 million. In part, the money comes from a group of prominent French entrepreneurs such as Charles Beigbeder, Claude Darmon and Olivier Fulconis. The money is to prepare first-in-man clinical trials of a treatment for Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease (an inherited, chronic nerve disorder that is characterized by the loss of muscle tissue and touch sensation) before the end of 2010. -WK-

Thermo Fisher buys Fermentas

Lithuania Loses its Biotech Beacon

You remember the four-page *Lab Times* report on the Lithuanian supplier of molecular biology reagents, Fermentas (“Baltic Boom”, *LT 3-2008*, page 42)? The ex-Soviet academic institute quickly adapted to capitalism in the 1990s and grew to be the world's second biggest provider of restriction enzymes, even challenging the market leader, New England Biolabs (Ipswich, USA).

However, the exciting and independent times are over. At the end of May it became known that Fermentas will soon be taken over by Thermo Fisher for €210 million. Once again a former standalone company has been snapped up by the huge supply company from Waltham, Massachusetts, as has been the case with so many others in recent years, including ...

... proteomics analysis specialist, Proxeon Biosystems (Odense, Denmark), in April 2010;

... handheld spectrometer manufacturer, Ahura Scientific (USA), in January 2010; and

... diagnostics assay maker, Brahms (Hennigsdorf, Germany), in October 2009; not to mention other acquisitions.

The Lithuanian deal reveals some details about Fermentas that have so far been top secret. For example, its revenue in 2009 (€44 million) and the current number of its staff (about 500). It also reveals the current course that Thermo Fisher is taking. Just a few months before the Fermentas deal, the US life sciences conglomerate acquired another producer of reagents, consumables, kits, and instruments for molecular biology applications, Finnzymes (Espoo, Finland).

With the Finns' €16 million in revenues in 2009, plus Fermentas' €44 million, and up against Thermo Fisher's powerful worldwide sales division, New England Biolabs faces a dangerous

new competitor. It's obvious, too, that Thermo Fisher is focussing on high-growth PCR-based testing markets, such as disease diagnostics and food quality testing – markets where companies like Qiagen and Roche are strong at the moment. -WK-



Thermo Fisher is keen to get a foot in the PCR door, as the taking over of Finnzymes and Fermentas indicates.