

Printed September 23, 2007 05:52pm AEST

## Stem-cell move puts us in the wings

Leigh Dayton, Science Writer | September 22, 2007

**TECHNICALLY, it's a brain drain. But when Melbourne scientist Alan Trounson takes over as the San Francisco-based head of the world's richest stem cell funding outfit next year, Australia stands to gain as much as it loses -- possibly more. Science Minister Julie Bishop got it in one.**

"Professor Trounson's appointment represents a unique opportunity for Australian researchers to collaborate with counterparts in the United States and throughout the world," she told Weekend Health.

"His strong knowledge of Australian research and scientists means there will be easier access for our institutions to the world's largest stem cell research program."

Industry Minister Ian Macfarlane agreed: "Professor Trounson's appointment will provide Australian researchers with stronger links to international stem cell initiatives." And former Victorian Science Minister -- now Premier -- John Brumby waxed lyrical, hailing Trounson as an "excellent ambassador" for the state's scientific and medical research expertise.

He predicted closer links between the Garden State and the Golden State.

Only Health Minister Tony Abbott -- a staunch opponent of ES cell research -- was relatively muted in his response to the news about the appointment of one of Australia's own as president of the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine (CIRM), the state agency with the job of doling out up to \$US300 million a year for ES cell research.

"Tony said he wishes professor Trounson well," Abbott's spokesperson said.

There's no doubt that the selection of Trounson -- director of the Monash Immunology and Stem Cell Laboratories (MISCL) and founder of the Australian Stem Cell Centre (ASCC) in Melbourne -- to the CIRM top job will open doors for Australian scientists. As MISCL associate director Graham Jenkin notes, "I see fantastic spin-offs for us."

Still, it's too soon to predict precisely what form the spin-offs will take, says Jenkin's MISCL colleague Andrew Elefanty. "It's hard to estimate how (Trounson's appointment) will translate into the global stage," notes Elefanty, co-leader of the ES Cell Differentiation Laboratory.

Given the international nature of science -- and the spotlight Trounson now shines on Australian researchers -- it's likely local researchers will be offered greater access to well-funded international collaborations. Leading overseas scientists may be reminded of the expertise Australians could add to high-level projects. Others, such as Martin Pera -- formerly with the ASCC and now head of the Institute for Stem Cell and Regenerative Medicine (ISCRM) at the University of Southern California -- may find it easier to include Australian partners.

Ultimately, though, scientists on both sides of the equator will benefit, predicts Bob Klein, the influential lawyer, property developer and driving force of the CIRM.

"Alan can capture the global state of the art and use that to leverage the research in California, hopefully in collaboration with great science in Australia," he said.

That does not mean efforts to lure more Australians across the Pacific, Klein hastens to add: "We only need one president." In fact, the CIRM doesn't need any scientists as it's purely a funding body, akin to the National Health and Medical Research Council, albeit with vastly more money to dispense.

"The two places are like chalk and cheese," says Trounson, clearly still astonished by what he's been handed. "There's no door that can't be tapped on. It's fantastic."

According to Klein, the job of the institute is to advance the development of ES cell therapies. "We're in a battle against chronic disease, not a battle between states or nations," he adds.

Still, the three-year-old institute has itself been something of a battleground. Until recently it ran on borrowed money and a bare-bones staff. That was because opponents of ES cell research had challenged the constitutionality of Proposition 71, the referendum measure passed by California voters to establish and fund the CIRM. The California Supreme Court gave its green light in May.

As well, Klein has taken flak for not getting the management team in place sooner. There were also rumours of

clashes between Klein and past president Zach Hall. Hall retired in April, precipitating quests for a replacement.

"So human relations is going to be Alan's first big job and it's a tough one," comments one observer. "He's going to have to come up with solutions pretty fast."

On the up side, Trounson is well-placed to manage the challenge. He'll pick up the reins just as the CIRM is able to move into high gear. Further, he's already forged a solid working relationship with Klein, who visited Australia during last year's legislative review of anti-cloning and embryo research laws.

Thanks to that participation, Klein has solid contacts with groups such as MISCL and the ASCC and is on good terms with Brumby, a strong advocate for medical research. Consequently, the prospect of more formalised links between Australia and California is excellent.

As Trounson says: "I'd very much like to build linkages with Australia." He claims that's part of his new job as a facilitator, pulling together world-wide scientific and therapeutic threads. "I've the opportunity to be part of the leadership in the front line of a major revolution in medicine," he explains.

---

*Copyright 2007 News Limited. All times AEST (GMT +10).*