

CoRE Of The Matter



NATIONAL RESEARCH CENTRE FOR
GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

23 APRIL 2004

EDITION NO. 1

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Introduction

Welcome to the first edition of *CoRE Of The Matter*. Following suggestions from CoRE members we plan to produce a monthly newsletter with news and views of NRGCD related matters. Our view is that the audience for the newsletter is mostly internal and the newsletter may in time become part of a more ambitious intranet system enabling not just communication of news etc but also effective, electronic handling of CoRE systems and processes such as reporting, travel, appointments, and project proposal management. We welcome your feedback, involvement, and contributions.

A key function of this newsletter is for members of the CoRE to alert each other about research protocols in development at an early enough stage that improved design and collaboration arises.

One key issue is an effective distribution system. Please peruse the address/distribution list and if there are CoRE associates that appear to have accidentally been omitted from the list, please let us know as soon as possible.

Steve Hodgkinson (Editor)

Comings and Goings

- Jane Harding, recently travelled to Sydney for the Perinatal Society meeting and then to Houston for the Society of Gynecologic Investigation (SGI).
- Murray Mitchell and Peter Gluckman also attend the SGI where Peter gave the plenary lecture to the satellite fetal physiology day and Murray gave an invited lecture at the mini symposium on preterm labour.
- Tony Reeve recently attended the American Association of Cancer Research Meeting in Orlando to explore new developments in high throughput genomics and bioinformatics.

Recent Events

As the Centre enters its second year two key events have recently taken place.

Scientific Advisory Panel

The first was the recent inaugural two day review meeting of the Scientific Advisory Panel (SAP).

The SAP is chaired by Prof. Bob Williamson from the Murdoch Children's Research Institute and other members include Prof. Sir Patrick Bateson FRS, Prof. Mark Hanson,

Lord Robert Winston, Dr Douglas Wilson, and Dr Ken McNatty.

The SAP is in the positive if slightly unusual position of being involved early in the development of the new research centre providing an opportunity to influence the direction of CoRE science in a strategic rather than reactionary fashion. Feedback from the SAP is that they greatly value this opportunity.

The meeting was widely considered a positive experience and great success.

The SAP has provided a Report to the Board a summary of which is provided below. One specific outcome is that the Board has agreed that members of the panel will contribute to the formulation of key performance indicators for CoRE science for next year.

"We note that the NRCGD is now well under way. It has outlined and commenced a program that is attempting to address issues of major scientific, agricultural and clinical importance for New Zealand. It is showing evidence of developing a culture of collaboration between scientists at Dunedin, Christchurch, Massey, AgResearch and Auckland. The Government and the Board of the NRCGD should be congratulated on the breadth of this initiative, which is unusual and ambitious by international standards.

The Scientific Advisory Panel (SAP) recognises that these programs are in their early stages, and believes that their initial progress augurs well for an exciting and productive future. We are impressed by the purchase and use of major items of equipment and the recruitment of new post-doctoral scientists. However, we also note that the program of research is very ambitious, and the program is even more ambitious if the non-research end points (such as commercialisation, national collaboration and education) are taken into account. At this initial stage, it is appropriate that a large number of projects are started, but we note that it will require strong leadership from the Board and the Directors to ensure that a critical mass of resources is devoted to successful projects as the NRCGD progresses. There is always a risk with a CoRE that it will drift towards mirroring a "standard scientific grant", and fail to capture the unique role that CoREs can represent for New Zealand.

It is important that interactions and exchanges between all of the campuses are encouraged, both at senior and more junior levels. The Scientific Advisory Panel recommends that meetings between the sites are held at least three to four times per year on a project basis, and once a year for those

committed to the NRCGD, even though we are aware that this will be expensive. It is particularly important that the clinical teams and those working with animal models have contacts in depth. We note that the NRCGD is giving priority to these initiatives.

The SAP is impressed with the speed at which the post-doctoral components of the science have developed, and note that emphasis is being placed on recruiting PhD students and excellent support staff.

We look forward to assisting the development of this exciting initiative.”

Scientific Advisory Panel, 26 February 2004

Science Planning Day, Auckland, 8 April 2004

The Centre is slightly under spent at the conclusion of its first year. Consequently it has funds available for priority projects seeding new collaborations. The Science Planning Day was intended to review current projects and to help identify interactions between CoRE participants that have the potential to be synthesised into new funded projects. In this sense the day was a great success for the attendees.

The programme began with an introduction by Peter Gluckman including a Strategy for Projects 1-5 (Previously Themes 1 and 2) followed by group break out and discussion

The challenges in the SAP report were discussed and in particular how we will need to manage the evolution of the science programme.

Feedback highlighted the need for closer communication and recommendation that in future projects are distributed early to maximise the potential for input and involvement.

The day's events continued with excellent presentations from Elwyn Frith, Catriona Jenkin, and Hannah Gibbons – all relatively new participants in the CoRE. Elwyn discussed a grant on maternal constraint and cross-fertilisation of breeds with different gestational lengths; Catriona on studies from her PhD thesis about fetal breast development; and Hannah on activation of glial cells and their effects on the death of neurons.

The afternoon session focussed on the neuroscience projects (6 and 7; previously Themes 3 and 4).

Mike Dragunow and Chris Williams spoke to the broad projects and Hannah Gibbons spoke (Hannah has recently been appointed to a Post Doctoral position with Mike).

From the Directorate

Major activities at present include the following:

Contracts

All outstanding contracts for 2004/2005 are presently with the Auckland Research Office. Detailed information is being added and they will shortly be distributed to participating Institutes. This is to be followed by a research contract consolidation exercise to reduce the administrative burden

Annual Report

The Centre's first Annual Report is due at the Tertiary Education Commission on 30 April 2004. It has been a big job compiling this document and we thank all who have contributed. The Report is intended to fill the dual purposes of meeting contractual obligations and popular profiling of the Centre. Consequently we have taken the extra step of presenting it as a company annual report and producing it in a 'glossy' form for distribution.

Peter has also had a very constructive meeting with TEC as to the longer term future of the CoRE

Restructuring the Directorate

The Liggins Institute is currently being reorganised to improve space utilisation. This has presented the opportunity to co-locate CoRE Directorate staff and they have recently moved into a suite of three offices on the second floor at the Liggins Institute. Karen Eggers has recently departed the Centre so responsibilities are currently shared between Peter Gluckman (director), Murray Mitchell (deputy-Director), Steve Hodgkinson (Research Co-ordinator/ Business Development), and Trisha Heistand (Accounts). We are currently reviewing our longer term administrative needs.

Nutrigenomics

A number of you were recently involved in the preparation of a NERF proposal to FoRST in the area of Nutritional Genomics. Unfortunately the proposal was unsuccessful. The feedback highlighted perceptions of the difficulty of structuring workable multi-institutional research programmes.

Teachers and Research

The NRCGD brings together some of the most distinguished biomedical scientists in New Zealand. Collectively we feel the responsibility to find innovative ways for young New Zealanders to participate in this country's biological future.

Discussions with high school science teachers revealed that they felt remote from many of the exciting new advances in the biological sciences. The new sciences are moving very fast and there is an enthusiasm amongst teachers and pupils to learn and contribute to those developments.

The NRCGD identified an exciting United States programme developed to engage high school teachers in medical research activities. With the assistance of the Murdock Foundation in Portland Oregon who administer the US scheme, Associate Professor Bernhard Breier attended a conference on the programme.

As a result, the NRCGD has now committed to piloting the programme in New Zealand with the first teachers entering in April 2004. The intention is that teachers be relieved from teaching duties for between four and six so as to be actively involved in NRCGD research, to become more familiar with modern research methods and to participate in a network of active scientists with whom they and their students can interact on an ongoing basis. If the pilot is successful we envisage a substantial scale up in 2005.

New sheep research facilities established with collaborative partner

The close partnership between LandCorp and the NRCGD has resulted in a new sheep research facility based close to Auckland. As the most advanced facility of its type, it enables individual penning and nutritional control of up to 120 animals and control of day/night lighting.

According to Massey University Professor and NRCGD Principal Investigator Hugh Blair and Liggins Institute sheep physiologist Mark Oliver, the new lab offers an unprecedented opportunity to improve design and control of experiments, greatly increasing the quality of data and reducing animal usage. Set on extensive farmland, the new facility will also decrease the animal stress associated with transport.

Hugh and Mark are studying the effect of nutrition around the time of conception on productivity in the resulting lambs – growth rate, milk production and carcass composition for example. The study is planned to go over several generations. Where appropriate, LandCorp will have access to the resulting information for application to animal production systems.

Ayla Graf

Ayla Graf (who is supervised by Bernie Breier and Michael Davison) has recently been appointed to the vacant student representative position on the Executive Committee. Ayla will be active in establishing a Students Association for the Centre.

Appointments

The Centre would like to formally welcome the following recent Post Doctoral Research Fellowships:

- Catriona Jenkinson (Project 1)
- Harriet Miles (Clinical Research Fellow Project 3)
- Alexandra Buckley (Project 4)
- Farhad Shafiei (Project 5)
- Arjan Scheepens (Project 6)
- Ghassan Maghzal (Project 7)
- Hannah Gibbons (Project 7)
- Nicola Thompson (Project 2 – Now on board)
- Jason Landon (Project 2 – Now on board)

Additionally the following applicants have recently started PhD programmes:

- Christopher Rumball (Project 1)
- Ayla Graf (Project 2)
- Jennifer Miles (Project 2)
- Sarah Hopkins (Project 3)
- James Elworthy (Project 5)
- Larissa Christophidas (Project 6)
- Himani Sumudumalee (Project 6)
- Joanne Lim (Project 7)

A warm welcome to all.

Upcoming Dates

6 May

Site Interaction Meeting, Wellington. 2-4pm Koru Club.

11 May

Science Planning Day, Massey. Focus on projects arising out of Massey work.

11 May

Follow-up meeting in Massey on projects reviewed at the science planning day – all interested are welcome. Local contact is Hugh Blair (under review).

12 May

EC Meeting by teleconference.

14 June

Science Planning Day, Dunedin. Focus on genomics projects.

EC Meeting by teleconference.

28 June

NZAP/NRGCD joint session on *Forming the partnership between animal production and medical science: Influence of early development on lifetime outcomes across agriculture and health including models for the study of metabolism and health*. For further details, contact Steve Hodgkinson.

Other

Board of Governance Meeting. To be confirmed.

Opening of NRGCD Offices and Analytical Facilities in Auckland ~ June 2004.

Opening of Auckland, Christchurch, and Dunedin capex by site to correspond with rescheduled Board of Governance meetings.

Science Forum

Paul Kenyon has kindly provided the attached summary of recent results. It raises key questions about where to from here with the project and it would be useful to provide suggestions and feedback. I suggest that the comments are provided directly to Paul, copied to Peter Gluckman, Steve Hodgkinson, and Murray Mitchell and others who may wish to become involved in the discussion request the associated emails directly from Paul.

Summary

Contributions to the next Newsletter are most welcome and should be sent to k.goldstone@auckland.ac.nz by the second Friday of each month.