

Nurse-ing Rockefeller

Nearly two years after Arnie Levine's troubled exit, and just in time for Thanksgiving, Sir Paul Nurse will take up residence as the ninth president of Rockefeller University in November. A man who freely admits that he has hitherto deliberately avoided working in the US, British-born Sir Paul says the change will do him good. "When you get a Nobel Prize you get lauded by everybody. I was worried I might rest on my laurels, so I'm now exposing myself like a baby. I could get it wrong," he told the *JCI*.

Sir Paul became head of the Imperial Cancer Research Fund (ICRF) in 1996 and remained in place through its merger with the Cancer Research Campaign to become Cancer Research UK (CRUK) in February 2002. He shared the 2001 Nobel Prize with Leland Hartwell and Tim Hunt for their discoveries of key regulators of the cell cycle, and insists that a great part of the Rockefeller attraction is that he will be able to pursue his own research. "There were a couple of posts that came up in the last year while I was considering [Rockefeller]. I did think about the Director of the Wellcome Trust and the MRC chief executiveship, but I really wanted to run a lab myself and I wasn't sure that I'd get enough time to do that in those positions."

Lab work

Sir Paul will pursue three aspects of research centered on fission yeast — the organism in which he discovered his Nobel Prize-winning control points of the cell cycle. He will continue to investigate DNA replication and cell cycle checkpoints and is also working on cell form in the hope of understanding

changes in cell shape during tumor metastasis. "Fission yeast have a precise cylindrical shape, and we've taken a genetic approach to understanding this. How does a cell comprehend its overall shape in the world? We've looked for genes that organize the microtubules of the cytoskeleton which

don't simply destroy the cell shape when they're damaged, but alter it in more subtle ways such as bending rather than growing straight."

Finally, although he declares himself an amateur in the field, he is also interested in the post-genomics of the yeast genome, particularly in terms of mapping the origins of replication given that fission

yeast are intermediate between budding yeast and higher metazoan cells in this respect.

The latter project will continue in collaboration with a team at The Wellcome Trust's Sanger Institute. Sir Paul will also preserve close contact with Jacky Hayle, a colleague of 20 years, with whom he has a permanent contract in London. Very few of his lab staff are transferring to Rockefeller, so he will maintain his current CRUK lab by shuttling across the Atlantic. "I'll lead a lab here at CRUK for another two years, and I'll visit London every six–seven weeks to run that. As it contracts I'll build up a lab in New York."

Balancing the books

Rockefeller's research spending is around \$240 million, virtually equal to CRUK's \$250 million research budget. "[Rockefeller is] a well run institution," he says. "I'm inheriting something in very good shape. But there are of course things that I'm

thinking about. There's a need for some more infrastructure support because there's been a lot of recruitment recently and we have to make sure that the endowment is in place to support that."

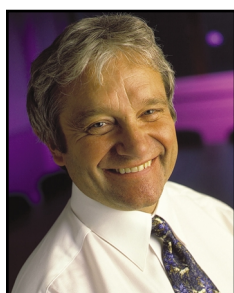
Rockefeller's endowment is substantial, but the last three–four years have seen financial markets stall. "The Rockefeller has barely lost anything over the past few years," he's quick to counter, "only a couple of percent, and most organizations have lost 30–40 percent. It's done brilliantly but might not have grown enough to absorb the extra recruitment." He will examine the need for fundraising and will look at ways of bringing in more response-mode grant money to the university.

Additionally he wants to bring the "science-in-society philosophy" for which he is renowned to the Upper East Side of Manhattan. "I've done quite a lot of this with the Royal Society and CRUK, but of course there's a different culture in the US that I need to get to know. Yet we have a responsibility to take a lead in discussions on topics such as stem cell research."

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A quick calculation of the presidential terms of office at Rockefeller reveals that they have become progressively shorter since Simon Flexner's 33-year rule, which began in 1902. Levine stayed for four years. Sir Paul, who admits to being in his early fifties, is confident of a respectable reign. "There are definitely two things that I know I can do: I have a lot of experience in running research organizations, and at the same time I yearn to do more of my research. A change of country will shake me up."

Karen Birmingham, London



Sir Paul Nurse
Taking a chance on America—finally.