

RESEARCH FOUNDATIONS

Biochemist Robert Tjian Named President of Hughes Institute

The Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI), the largest private funder of biomedical research in the United States, has chosen a new president. He is University of California, Berkeley, biochemist Robert Tjian, a longtime Hughes investigator known as a driven researcher and devoted mentor. On 1 April, Tjian will replace Thomas Cech, who will return to research at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

The Chevy Chase, Maryland-based HHMI, which has an endowment of \$17.5 billion and spent \$685 million last year, supports more than 350 investigators at universities and funds education programs and scientists abroad. Tjian said “there are many reasons” why he accepted an offer from the Hughes board of trustees, which based its search on nominations. The main one, he says, is “to give back” to the institution that has funded him for 22 years. Moreover, Hughes “has a huge impact,” and “I think it’s a fantastic opportunity to try to help scientific research and science education in the United States and internationally,” Tjian says.

Tjian, 59, studies the biochemistry of gene transcription. At Berkeley, he has been heav-



Multitasker. Biochemist Robert Tjian’s broad experiences likely helped win him the job of HHMI president.

ily involved in recruiting new faculty, reshaping its research and education programs, and directing its nearly decade-old health sciences initiative, which promotes interdisciplinary research. He also co-founded Tularik,

a biotech company that was sold to Amgen in 2004 for \$1.3 billion.

HHMI board of trustees member Joseph Goldstein says this range of experiences made Tjian “exactly right” for a job that has become “more complicated” in the past few years, as Cech began new programs and oversaw the creation of HHMI’s first research campus, Janelia Farm, in Loudoun County, Virginia. Tjian is “an outstanding scientist, he’s an excellent mentor to students and post-doctoral fellows, he’s interested in education, he has a reputation for being very organized, and he has a broad view of biology and medicine,” says Goldstein, a Nobel Prize-winning biochemist at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas, who has known Tjian for more than 20 years.

As Cech did during his 8 years at HHMI, Tjian plans to keep his Berkeley lab—he says he wouldn’t have taken the job otherwise—but will spend no more than 1 day a week there and at Janelia Farm. He has also agreed to give up his position on the boards of several biotech companies by April.

Tjian says that he has no specific new programs in mind coming in: “I need to go in there and take a look.” For now, he plans to continue HHMI’s aim of funding the “right people.” He doesn’t expect to tinker with Janelia Farm, which he considers an ongoing “experiment.” He expects to visit Hughes in the coming months while Cech is still there to “learn the ropes.”

—JOCELYN KAISER

FELLOWSHIPS

An International Plan to Hatch Scientist-Entrepreneurs

TIANJIN, CHINA—Who said science and business don’t mix? Last week, more than 100 young researchers from 60 countries were special guests at the summer meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF), held near Tianjin, China’s third biggest urban area. While corporate titans anguished over the U.S. bank bailout, young scientists and entrepreneurs explored how to forge new links.

To ease neophytes into the world of dealmaking, the InterAcademy Panel (IAP), a network that sponsors science-in-society programs on behalf of 100 national science academies, plans to award five \$10,000 seed grants to the most compelling joint R&D proposals arising from interactions at the meeting between scientists and business leaders. “The idea is to nurture new linkages,” says IAP co-chair Howard Alper, a chemist and chair of Canada’s Science, Technology and Innova-

tion Council. “Companies need not put in a cent at the beginning.” Alper expects many academies to provide matching grants. The effort is timely, says Padmini Warrior, chief technology officer at the California computer firm, Cisco Systems. “The lines are blurring between breakthrough, start-up, and scale-up,” she says.

Top scientists are no strangers to WEF, famed for its winter meetings in Davos, Switzerland. Klaus Schwab, WEF’s founder and executive chair, says he has long sought “to integrate technology even more into WEF activities.” Last spring, Alper and fellow IAP co-chair Chen Zhu, China’s health minister, persuaded Schwab to expand WEF’s science program and invite young scientists. “We want to create a sustained integration of S&T [science and technology] in the forum,” says Alper.

As a result, WEF’s second annual “New Champions” meeting featured workshops

on managing science and frontier science, and plenary sessions on nanotechnology and life sciences. “The academics seemed to embrace the idea that they needed to engage with the business community in language that the latter could understand,” says Tom Ilube, chief executive officer of Garlik, a company based in Richmond, U.K., that specializes in protecting consumers against identity theft.

Guruprasad Madhavan cottoned on quickly. At the meeting, the S&T policy fellow at the National Academies in Washington, D.C., forged a partnership with entrepreneurs who will help him develop a low-cost medical device business model for poor villages in Tamil Nadu, his home state in southern India. With such tangible outcomes, Alper and others hope scientists have earned a permanent place at the WEF table.

—RICHARD STONE