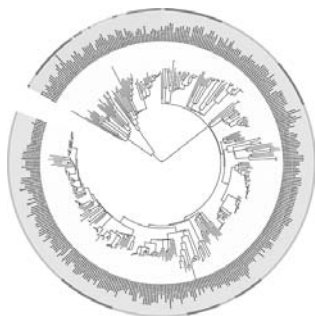




EMBL-EBI goes to Westminster

EMBL-EBI Director Janet Thornton and group leader Ewan Birney were among experts invited to give evidence to the House of Lords' Science and Technology Committee in London on 5 November. The committee was gathering evidence on genomic medicine with a view to determining the feasibility of linking genomic and medical data for future healthcare. In the UK, the business of Parliament takes place in two chambers, the House of Lords and the House of Commons; the House of Lords Select Committees investigate issues relating to Europe, science and technology, economics and the constitution. [page 2](#)

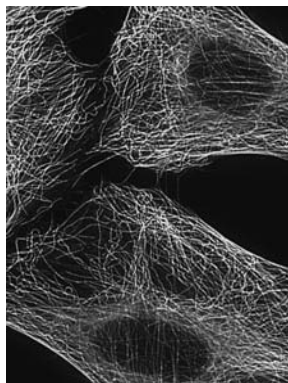
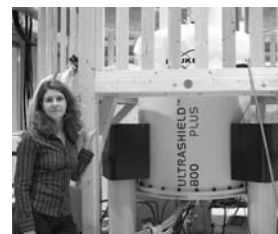


Tree of life to form centrepiece of museum exhibit

The world's largest technological museum, the Deutsches Museum in Munich, will use the Bork group's 'tree of life' – a summary of all the knowledge available about the genealogy of life on earth, also known as phylogenesis – as part of a new permanent exhibition due to open next year. The museum, which attracts about 1.3 million visitors per year, is currently in the process of incorporating the genealogical tree into an interactive display in an new installation exploring nano- and biotechnology in its Zentrum Neue Technologien (ZNT). [page 5](#)

Mission impossible: EMBL's new advances in NMR

The new Bruker 800 MHz spectrometer in the new nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) building at EMBL Heidelberg brings the institute's technology in the field up-to-date. "Having a 200 MHz bigger machine is not just a 20% improvement – it's the difference between being able to see something and simply *not* being able to see it," explains group leader Teresa Carlomagno. In an interview, she and NMR Facility Manager Bernd Simon explain the advantages of NMR as a structural biology method – and the ins and outs of looking after such an important piece of equipment. [page 6](#)



The woman who wasn't there

HeLa cells have helped researchers develop the polio vaccine and uncover the secrets of cancer and viruses; they've led to important advances like stem cell research, gene mapping, cloning and *in vitro* fertilisation. Even if you've used HeLa yourself in your research, you probably haven't given much thought to their origin – and even if you have, you can be forgiven for getting it wrong. In one of the last of this year's Science and Society forum lectures, freelance science writer Rebecca Skloot set the record straight about the true – and shocking – origin of the cell line. [page 7](#)

Angus steps down



After six years at the helm the Alumni Association's much-loved Chair, Angus Lamond, has relinquished his seat. Read his tips on how to cope after leaving EMBL – juggling helps, apparently – inside. [page 10](#)

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EMBL-EBI goes to Westminster!

Janet and Ewan called upon as expert witnesses by House of Lords Select Committee

EMBL-EBI Director Janet Thornton and group leader Ewan Birney were among experts invited to give evidence to the House of Lords' Science and Technology Committee in London on 5 November.

The business of Parliament in the UK takes place in a two-chamber system: the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The House of Lords Select Committees investigate work relating to Europe, science and technology, economics and the constitution.

The Science and Technology Committee, which consisted of Lord Patel, Lord Colwyn, Lord Taverne, Lord Winston, Baroness Finlay of Llandaff and Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve, was gathering evidence on genomic medicine with a view to determining the feasibility of linking genomic and medical data for future healthcare. Janet and Ewan were joined as

expert witnesses by Professor Anthony Brookes from the University of Leicester.

The panel posed questions on the major challenges of using genomic data in healthcare, particularly in terms of data management, required infrastructure and the training of scientists and healthcare professionals. All three witnesses emphasised the need to integrate bioinformatics resources with biomedical data, requiring the development of a strong infrastructure for the emerging field of biomedical informatics. The ELIXIR project (see article on page 8) was also discussed as an illustration of the challenge of maintaining Europe's biological data resources in the face of a massive influx of new data from initiatives such as the 1000 Genomes Project.

The main conclusion of the session was that there was important work to be done in estab-

lishing the mechanisms needed to make clinical use of genomic information in the future.

Janet, Ewan and Anthony's session followed evidence on the latest advances in DNA sequencing technology, which involved the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute's Dr Richard Durbin as an expert, as well as representatives from Illumina, Oxford Nanopore Technologies and Applied Biosystems.

– Louisa Wright

Have your say

Got twenty minutes to spare between experiments? Use the time to complete EMBL's online administration survey and make your opinion heard.

The survey, which is provided by expert consultants at Bristol University, has been designed to gather your views about the efficiency and effectiveness of the personnel, finance, payroll, recruitment and purchase departments. It will be live for four weeks in the new year and is totally anonymous – the only personal information you are asked to provide is your EMBL location. The results of the survey will be published early in 2009.

The website is already online with some information and FAQs, and the survey itself will be live from 6 January until 3 February 2009. Check it out at www.embl.org/staffonly/survey.

L-r: Ewan Birney, Richard Durbin (Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute), Janet Thornton, Geoff Smith (Illumina), Anthony Brookes (University of Leicester) and Clive Brown (Oxford Nanopore Technologies) outside Parliament



Global effort to investigate role of microbes in health and disease

You may think you've got a lot of cells – but those of the microorganisms living on and in your body outnumber yours ten to one! Living with such communities has a big influence on the host's development, physiology, immunity and nutrition, among other things, but the effects of this lifelong coexistence have remained largely undocumented – until now.

October saw the launch in Heidelberg of the International Human Microbiome Consortium (IHMC), which will enable researchers to sequence and characterise the role of the human microbiome – the collective genomes of all microorganisms living in or on the human body – in health and disease.

Data generated by IHMC projects will be made freely available to the global scientific community through EMBL and the US-

based National Institutes of Health (NIH) Human Microbiome Project Data Analysis and Coordination Center. They will also be distributed to other public databases, including those hosted at EMBL-EBI and the National Center for Biotechnology Information, USA.

Research organisations from all nations supporting similar research efforts are invited to become participants, and contributors already include Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization, the Canadian Institute of Health Research and Genome, China's Ministry of Science and Technology, the European Commission and the NIH. Each participating research group plans to focus on describing different body sites and diseases, while the US and EC will also contribute to a reference set of completely

sequenced microbial genomes.

In a related move, leaders from the NIH and the EC recently agreed to combine the data from the NIH's Human Microbiome Project and the EC's Metagenomics of the Human Intestinal Tract (MetaHIT) project. This will contribute an initial set of microbial genomes to the IHMC's international effort.

"This global initiative will allow us to explore unknown territories," says Peer Bork, joint coordinator of EMBL's Structural and Computational Biology Unit, who is in charge of data coordination and analysis for MetaHIT. "Understanding the contribution of microbes to our bodies will have wide-ranging impacts on medicine, pharmacology, nutrition science and many other disciplines."

To be or not to be?

More than 200 attendees – including EMBL's new intake of students and visitors from as far afield as India and Argentina – learnt about the immeasurable number of decisions made every second by biological systems at the 10th EMBL PhD Student Symposium on 23-25 October.

Big names in molecular biology, neuroscience, population research and cell biology contributed lectures to the programme of talks, panel discussions and poster sessions at 'Decision making in Biology – Nature at the crossroads' at EMBL Heidelberg. Highlights included Nobel Laureate Tim Hunt's presentation, 'Getting in and out of mitosis', and Susan Greenfield talking about the neuroscience of consciousness.

This year's proceedings kicked off with an opening lecture in German by Stefan Schuster from the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, 'Decision Making: kleine Fische, große



Entscheidungen', which was held downtown at Heidelberg university. The programme also included the presentation of the 2008 EMBO/EMBL Science Writing Prize to winner Bhupesh Kumar Prusty.

"One great thing about the symposium is that it was always very interactive," says Judith

Zaugg, one of the organising committee.* "We started with a session on the topic of the mind, so that threw up lots of food for thought and areas for discussion at the very beginning of the symposium. Stimulated by that, we had many discussions during the other sessions as well."

Particularly successful was the 'meet the speakers' dinner, which allowed plenty of opportunity for the young researchers to chat face-to-face with the leading scientists. "It was great that Tim Hunt could stay for the duration of the symposium and lots of people got to meet him," comments Judith, who's from the Luscombe group at EMBL-EBI. "Another very interesting part was the panel discussion, where we talked about how to justify basic research to the public. That's something that everyone needs to think about."

*Thanks to this year's organisers: Annelie, Archana, Beat, France, Francesca, Hubert, Jacopo N., Jacopo L., Judith, Kasia, Manuela, Marco, Maria, Maria Antonietta, Martina, Mirna, Rosa, Samuel, Sara, Sarada, Steffie and Xavier!

Pictures please! Let your images make you famous

Does your work at EMBL generate fabulous scientific images, like the ones from the Stelzer group shown below? If so, a new initiative from the EMBL press office can help you get them onto news-stands all over the world!

Newspapers and magazines are always looking for a 'picture of the week' or an eye-catching image to draw in the readers, and EMBL's new picture releases work a bit like press releases. They're sent to around 600 science journalists and several news wires, but instead of being timed alongside the publication of a paper, they're released independently.

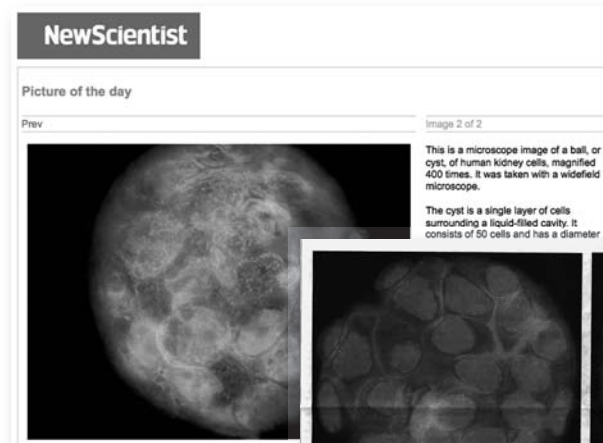
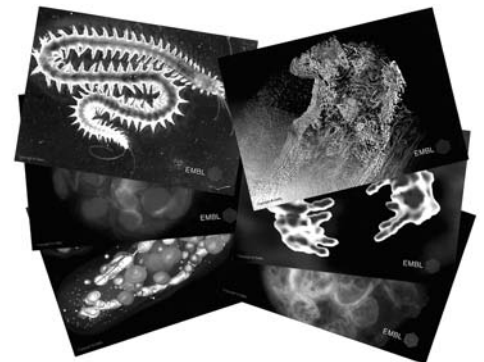
The images are made available as high-res tiffs or jpegs so print publications and websites can publish them with an explanatory caption.

EMBL's first picture release was sent out on 23 October and featured Emmanuel Reynaud's pictures of human kidney cell cysts. This gained coverage in the German national press, among

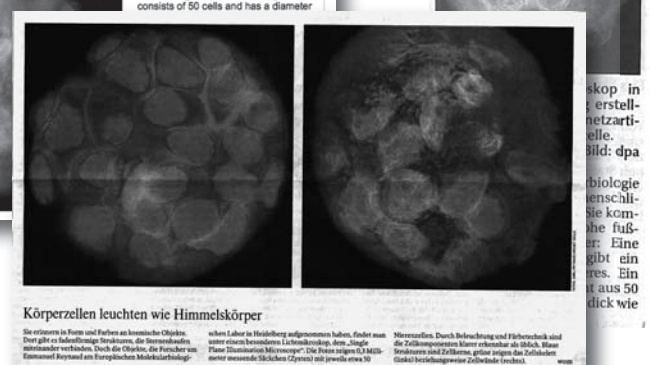
others, and one image was chosen as 'Picture of the Day' on the *New Scientist* website.

If you've got some great images – and it doesn't matter how old they are – submit them to the press office using the guidelines below.

- Great EMBL images are also always gratefully received for marketing purposes, like the postcard sets. The latest collection of six (pictured right) are available from the Office of Information and Public Affairs at EMBL Heidelberg and can be sent out to friends, family and work associates, or can even double as complement slips.



Some of the press coverage from the first picture release. *New Scientist's* Picture of the Day (above), *Die Welt* (middle), *Der Neue Tag* (right)



Submitting an image

Simply send an e-mail with your image – it should be attractive, eye-catching or colourful – to pressoffice@embl.de. The image doesn't need to be tied to a topical publication, but it shouldn't be something that you're planning to publish in the future. If your picture is suitable, the press office will contact you for a description and to give you details of the size and format required.

Uncovering the secrets of the deep

It's a remarkable ability; with simple eyes containing only two cells, marine zooplankton can sense the direction of light and swim towards it. Now, in a study published in the 20 November issue of *Nature*, EMBL researchers and their collaborators have unravelled the method behind this madness and, in doing so, discovered how the very first eyes to evolve might have worked.

The larvae of marine invertebrates – worms, sponges and jellyfish – have the simplest 'eyespot' that exist, consisting of just two cells: a photoreceptor cell and a pigment cell. These eyespots resemble the 'proto-eyes' suggested by Charles Darwin as the first eyes to appear in animal evolution. Studying the larvae of the marine ragworm *Platynereis dumerilii*, Detlev Arendt's team at EMBL Heidelberg and colleagues from the Max Planck Institute (MPI) for Developmental Biology found that a nerve connects the photoreceptor cell to the cells that bring about phototaxis – the swimming towards light exhibited by many zooplankton larvae.

"We assume that the first eyes in the animal kingdom evolved for exactly this purpose.



Understanding phototaxis thus unravels the first steps of eye evolution," explains Detlev.

The photoreceptor cell detects light and converts it into an electrical signal that travels down its neural projection, which makes a connection with a band of cells endowed with cilia. These beat to displace water and bring about movement. Shining light on one eyespot changes the beating of the cilia, and the resulting local changes in water flow are sufficient to alter the direction of swimming.

The second eyespot cell, the pigment cell, confers the directional sensitivity to light. It absorbs light and casts a shadow over the pho-

totoreceptor. The shape of this shadow varies according to the position of the light source and is communicated to the cilia through the signal of the photoreceptor.

"Platynereis can be considered a living fossil," says Gáspár Jékely, a former member of Arendt's lab who now heads a group at the MPI. "It still lives in the same environment as millions of years ago and has preserved many ancestral features. Studying the eyespots of its larva is probably the closest we can get to figuring out what eyes looked like when they first evolved."

Learn from your peers

When you need to learn something at EMBL, you may not need to look very far for a teacher. Group leaders François Nédélec and Lars Hufnagel, together with PhD students Sebastian Streichan and Beat Rupp, took to the classroom to teach essential software skills to 15 pre- and postdocs on 13-16 October, supported by EICAT and Marie Curie funding.

The course was on mathematics-based software package MATLAB, which Sebastian and Beat had taught informally in the past. As more students expressed an interest, they obtained logistic support from EICAT, who secured the software licenses and arranged for funding from the EU's FP6 PhD symposium grant to run the course officially. They also procured the services of François and Lars to run the course while they acted as tutors, giving hands-on help.

"MATLAB is something that would be of use to anybody working in the Cell Biology unit, for example," explains Sebastian. "It's a tool for doing numerical computations which biologists can use for quantitative calculations, image analysis and modelling."

"It's especially useful for those without much of a background in maths who want to publish data," adds Beat. "It's a much better way of presenting analyses in plots than Excel, for example."

"This is a good example of sharing resources – both financial and peoples' existing skills – to provide training for others," says EICAT Coordinating Manager Matthias Haury. "We save money by having EMBL people as trainers, and in this case it was also quite interdisciplinary, providing complimentary skills that could be used in many scientific areas."

EICAT will support additional training activities run by EMBL staff in the future, and is also hiring a new scientific training officer, who will provide further support to such initiatives. If you'd like to share your own particular skills by running a course and would like help from EICAT, contact Matthias at haury@embl.de.

The name's Mattaj...Iain Mattaj

Good and evil came face-to-face for the ultimate showdown 2,635 metres above sea level recently when the DGs of the EIROforum gathered at ESO's Paranal site in Chile for their annual assembly... oh no, hang on, that's not right.

The desolately beautiful astronomical research site in the South American desert has been in the news for more than one reason lately, the other being that it served as the location of the action-packed dénouement in the newly released James Bond film, *Quantum of Solace*.

So when EMBL DG Iain Mattaj was there on 9-11 November to meet with the directors of fellow EIROforum members ESA, ESO,

Cern, EFDA, ILL and ESRF, there was plenty of sightseeing to be done in between discussions about the future directions of the partnership of Europe's seven largest intergovernmental research organisations. ESO's underground Residencia hotel, which offers workers and visitors much-needed respite from the harsh environment, was cast as the perfect Bond villain hide-out in the film.

The group also enjoyed a trip up to ESO's new Atacama Large Millimeter/submillimeter Array (ALMA) telescope, which will be completed in 2012. It stands at 5,100 metres, so everyone was all given bottled oxygen – and everyone had to use it!



Building bridges

This year's postdoc retreat on 10-12 October at Aix-les-Bains in the Savoyen region of France gave 51 postdocs from all EMBL sites a chance to get together and talk science from their own perspective. The programme of talks, discussions and poster sessions allowed lots of opportunity for the participants to mingle with people with similar interests. Rather than including talks by external speakers, this year's retreat focussed on an increase in 'connectivity' between the attendees.

Besides the scientific input, a general forum to discuss postdoc issues took place on the Sunday morning. The session was started by Vivian Pogenberg, who introduced the European Charter of Researchers – a set of principles and recommendations of good practice for researchers, employers and funders of researchers issued by the European Commission – and discussed the current status of postdocs at EMBL. Other topics of interest which came to light during the forum including taxes on fellowships, the pension scheme, dependants' allowances and the mentorship programme for new postdocs at EMBL.

Since postdocs come and go independently without the support of an organisational structure like the PhD programme, events such as the retreat are even more important and beneficial. It was also agreed that generating more publicity for the Postdoc Association and improving the website could encourage both newcomers and existing postdocs to get take part in events such as the wine and cheese sessions and have more contact with others. If you'd like to get involved in the association, please contact us via the webpage at www.embl.org/training/postdocs/association.html.

– Gregor Reither

Tree of life takes root

Bork group's creation to form centrepiece of new exhibition

Right: Chris Creevey, Peer Bork and Tobias Doerks with the latest version of the tree



Photo: Christine Panagiotidis

The world's largest technological museum is to use the Bork group's 'tree of life' as the hub of a new permanent exhibition.

The Deutsches Museum in Munich, which attracts about 1.3 million visitors per year, is putting together a new interactive installation exploring nano- and biotechnology which will open at the end of next year in its Zentrum Neue Technologien.

They approached the Bork group earlier this year to request the use of their genealogical tree – a summary of all the knowledge available about the genealogy of life on earth, also known as phylogenesis – and are currently in the process of incorporating the image into an interactive display.

"The center of the exhibition will be a round visitors' lab like a UFO containing an installation on synthetic life forms," explains Life Sciences Curator Birte Hauser.

"In the middle, there will be a reconstruction of the Miller apparatus, which was the first to produce organic molecules from inorganic under early earth conditions; underneath, EMBL's tree of life will spread over the table, and an audio presentation will outline different scientific theories on the interaction of molecules, the creation of life and phylogenesis."

The first genealogical tree was published by German naturalist Ernst Haeckel in 1870, and was inspired by a sketch by Charles Darwin. The Bork group's tree is one of the highest-resolution descriptions of the evolution of all life ever made; it was begun in 2005 by Francesca Ciccarelli, Tobias Doerks and Christian von Mering, and automated and expanded by Chris Creevey, who eliminated instances of horizontal gene transfer using an automatic data-cleaning method.

When in India...

EMBL Hamburg team leader Manfred Weiss (left) and group leader Paul Tucker (right) embracing Rajasthani tradition in Pune, India, last month for an EMBO World Lecture Course on Macromolecular Crystallography. Together with EMBL Hamburg staff scientist Santosh Panjikar and colleagues from India's National Chemical Laboratory, Manfred and Paul organised the course to present recent methodological developments in crystallisation, data collection, structure determination and function prediction to 79 young participants from India and elsewhere. EMBO's World Lecture Courses cater for students at an early career stage by providing up-to-date information on a range of topics, as well as opportunities to meet experts and make contact with fellow scientists from other geographical areas.



Bilateral meeting

Members of the EMBL Grenoble and Hamburg outstations came together for their 5th annual bilateral meeting in Hamburg on October 30-31. Topics ranged from hardware and software developments for synchrotron beamlines to automatic and high-throughput sample handling. As in the past, project teams were formed for LIMS, detectors and frameworks for beamline controls to coordinate efforts on both sites and form the foundation for future collaborations.

"This meeting gets people together during the developmental stages of new instrumentation and technologies, which can be really useful," commented group leader Thomas Schneider.

– Jochen Müller-Dieckmann

Mission impossible: EMBL's new advances in NMR

Walking into the heart of the new nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) facility at EMBL Heidelberg is like stepping into a factory. There's the chugging of some huge, ceaseless engine; there's a constant hum and a rhythmic beeping noise – and in the middle of this spectrometry room, several metres apart, stand two large metal canisters resembling, if anything, parts of space rockets.

"It's actually because of the older 600 MHz magnet that we have so much space between them," explains Teresa Carlomagno, NMR specialist and group leader at EMBL for the past year. "Unlike the new 800 MHz one, it doesn't have a built-in shield mechanism. If you go beyond here" – she indicates a barrier – "it'll mess your wristwatch up."

The sparkling new Bruker 800 MHz spectrometer is EMBL's recent acquisition, whose convoluted arrival disrupted the Kinderhaus party on 26 September and which brings EMBL's NMR technology up-to-date. "It's not the strongest one in existence," admits Teresa, "but having a 200 MHz bigger machine is not just a 20% improvement, for example – it's the difference between being able to see something and simply *not* being able to see it."

NMR is a technique with which scientists get information on biomolecules at the atomic level. Looking – or more accurately, listening – to the transition between two energy states in the nuclei of a protein, RNA or complex after they are perturbed in the strong magnetic field of the spectrometer, researchers can get an idea of the local environment of each nuclei. This information can then be used to derive details about the overall structure, determine where compounds may bind, or to get an idea of how rigid or flexible different parts of the molecule are.

"NMR uses samples in solution, and with the higher magnetic field we can look at more dilute samples, which means we can look at bigger complexes," says Teresa. "Also, in NMR you have signals coming from every single proton or carbon and nitrogen atom in the molecule. At a higher field, these signals are better dispersed and stronger."

As a technique, NMR offers much to EMBL's move towards a systems biology approach. "NMR has traditionally been thought of as a competitor to crystallography, but it's actually a complementary technique in a pool of other structural biology methods," explains Teresa. "It concentrates on things you can only see in solution, like dynamic complexes, unfolded proteins, weak intermolecular interactions or

"Having a 200 MHz bigger machine is the difference between being able to see something and simply *not* being able to see it"

– Teresa Carlomagno

low populated transition states. In this respect NMR allows us to see the invisible.

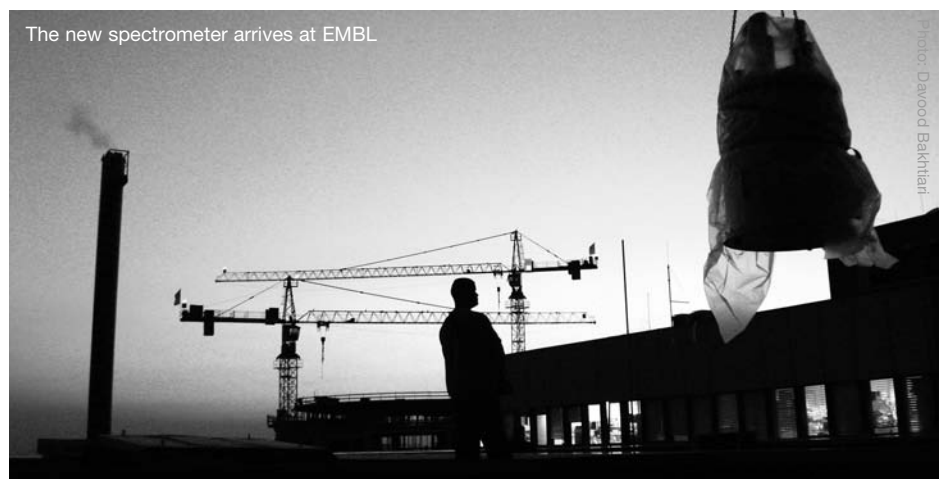
"Recent developments in NMR technologies make it possible to see how several molecules talk to each other in bigger complexes. With NMR we can even see parts of the ribosome, provided they have a certain degree of mobility."

The new, stronger magnet demands a different approach as far as maintenance is concerned. "We need an absolutely stable, homog-

enous field, and the stability depends on superconductivity, meaning we generate the magnet using a coil which has no resistance and therefore generates no heat," explains Bernd Simon, NMR Facility Manager. "Up to 700 MHz, the superconductivity is achieved by putting the coil in a liquid helium bath, but with more MHz than that you have to make the surrounding liquid even colder. So this new one is refrigerated so that the coil is at a temperature of 2 kelvin (-271.15° centigrade)."

What happens if the temperature rises? "The cooling pump phones us at home if there's a problem," smiles Bernd. "We have a window of an hour or two to react, but if there's a 'quench' when the helium escapes because the coil starts to produce heat, it takes a week or two to recharge the magnet again."

That happened when the new spectrometer arrived – not an uncommon occurrence – but since then the machine has been running without a hitch. "Big magnets really allow us to look at big things," concludes Teresa. "As the size of the molecule or the complex we look at by NMR increases, we have to compromise with resolution. However, in these cases, we can complement NMR – and this is particularly the case at EMBL, with its integrated approach – with other techniques such as small angle scattering or EM measurements to build the bigger picture."



The new spectrometer arrives at EMBL

Photo: Davood Balakhtian

Winter Council decisions

The Winter Council meeting took place in Hinxton on 25 November. These are the main results:

- A celebration of the 10th anniversary of EMBL Monterotondo is planned for June.
- The next EMBL programme – the guidelines on which EMBL runs on a 5-year basis – will cover the period 2012 to 2016 and development of this will begin in 2009 at the faculty retreat.
- Marcus Heisler has been hired to lead the first Australian group in the development programme agreed with Australia's associate membership.
- The new Chair of SAC will be Werner Kühlbrandt, succeeding Paul Nurse.
- Council approved the following recommendations by the working group on terms and conditions of employment:
 - introduce fellows into the EMBL social security system. The necessary funding will be included in the next indicative scheme commencing 2012;
 - increase the annual maximum education grant;
 - introduce changes in compensation for overtime for personnel in grades 1-6 ;
 - lengthen the notice period for staff members to accept contract extensions to at least six months.
- The opening ceremony for the Advanced Training Centre has been scheduled for 11 March 2010.

The woman who wasn't there

Millions of researchers use HeLa cells without giving a thought to their true origin. Writer Rebecca Skloot visited EMBL to set the record straight

HeLa – the first human cell line ever grown in culture – is one of the most widely used and important laboratory tools in medicine and research. HeLa cells have helped researchers develop the polio vaccine and uncover the secrets of cancer and viruses; they've led to important advances like stem cell research, gene mapping, cloning and *in vitro* fertilisation. Sent to labs in their billions all around the world – and beyond – HeLa cells have been blown up at nuclear test sites and flown in space shuttle missions.

Even if you've used HeLa yourself in your research, you probably haven't given much thought to their origin – and even if you have, you can be forgiven for getting it wrong. As recently as 1994, the McGraw-Hill Dictionary of Scientific and Technical Terms was still describing HeLa cells as 'human cancer cells maintained in tissue culture...originally excised from the cervical carcinoma of a patient named Helen Lane.'

Keep your refs in check

The more papers you publish, the better, right? Well, the downside is that the more you have, the more complicated it becomes to organise your references. That's where, for many people, Endnote (www.adeptscience.co.uk/products/refman/endnote) comes in; it's a valuable reference tool which allows you to find, organise and transform references, bibliographies and PDFs with ease, as well as importing and exporting them into Word.

Tobias Sack at EMBL Heidelberg's Szilárd Library runs well-received Endnote courses for EMBL staff. The course is mainly aimed at beginners and starts by introducing the main features, but those of you who already use it may benefit too, as Tobias' training sessions cover some more specialist applications including integrated online searches, PDF and reference import, CWYW, amending and creating individual displays and bibliographies, to name just a few.

If you're interested, send an e-mail (sack@embl.de) or drop into the library office. Training can also be made available to outstation staff.

The truth is, there never was a Helen Lane. The 'He' and 'La' of the name actually stands for Henrietta Lacks, a housewife from Baltimore and mother of five children, who died from that same cancer in 1951 at the age of just 31. But the story here isn't just about a pseudonym or a cover-up.

Rebecca Skloot, a freelance science writer based in Memphis, Tennessee, visited EMBL Heidelberg on 24 November to give a Science and Society forum lecture, 'The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks', which is also the title of her forthcoming book. "Although Henrietta's cells did wonders for science, they had troubling consequences for her family," explains Rebecca, who, since her early days as a biomedical student planning to become veterinary scientist, has been fascinated by the story. "Her husband,

"They're pretty sure that someone, somewhere, has profited from their mother's death"

– Rebecca Skloot



Photo: Christine Panagiotidis

an impoverished tobacco farmer with a third grade education who struggled to afford housing and healthcare, didn't learn about the cells until 25 years after Henrietta's death."

That itself was only due to a twist of fate. The cells had been taken without Henrietta or her husband's knowledge or consent – not unusual in those days – but it wasn't until 1974 that suspicion grew that they might be infiltrating the world's stock of other cell cultures. Researchers approached the Lacks family for blood and tissue samples – anything to find genetic markers to help identify the cells.

For a family with a third grade education, this sudden news that their mother's cells were alive in a lab – that 'she', 25 years dead, was being tested, manipulated, blown up and sent into space – was bewildering. Even with the understanding that the researchers were testing for hereditary material was confusing. "Deborah Lacks, Henrietta's youngest daughter, thought she'd get a phone call telling her whether she was going to live or die. She never heard back from the researchers and soon had the first of what would become several breakdowns," says Rebecca.

The story raises some big questions about informed consent and patient confidentiality. "It's often held up as an example of scientists acting unethically – they didn't ask her, and then they sold the cells and got rich on them. But it's not that simple. What the scientists did wasn't maliciously intended at all, but it wasn't just a couple of cells; to somebody, that was their mother."

Rebecca hopes that the sale of her book will eventually enable a scholarship fund to be set up in Henrietta's name. "Members of the Lacks family feel they've been passed over in the story. They know their mother's cells started a medical revolution and are now bought and sold around the world, but they're pretty sure that someone, somewhere, has profited from their mother's death – and it's not them."

Dean around the world and back

Dean of Graduate Studies Helke Hillebrand has been busy spreading the word about the EMBL International PhD Programme.

On 27-29 October, Helke travelled to Nicaragua's capital Managua to attend the 1st international workshop of the Nicaraguan-Finnish Agro-Biotechnology Project (NIFAPRO), where she gave a talk about the EIPP and structures implemented in order to sustain strategies for higher educational training. NIFAPRO was founded in 2007 to build capacity in agrobiotechnology for the country, increasing agricultural productivity and food

safety, facilitating economic development in rural areas and reducing poverty.

"Participants came from all over the world and everyone was very interested in learning about and discussing concepts for structured graduate education. Many had already heard of EMBL's PhD programme and were interested to find out how it works," she says. "Let's see if we now get a few great applications from Latin America."

On November 24-27, Helke also gave a talk 17th symposium of the International Scientific Centre for Fertilizers in Cairo, Egypt.

Europe's bioinformatics community meets to review progress

The EC-funded ELIXIR project (European Life-Science Infrastructure for Biological Information) held its second stakeholder meeting at the Wellcome Trust Genome Campus, Hinxton, on 18 November. 143 delegates from 26 countries came together to hear about the progress made and decide the project's next steps. ELIXIR aims to establish a sustainably funded infrastructure for biological information in Europe, to support innovation in life science research, knowledge generation and its translation to medicine, the environment, the bio-industries and society.

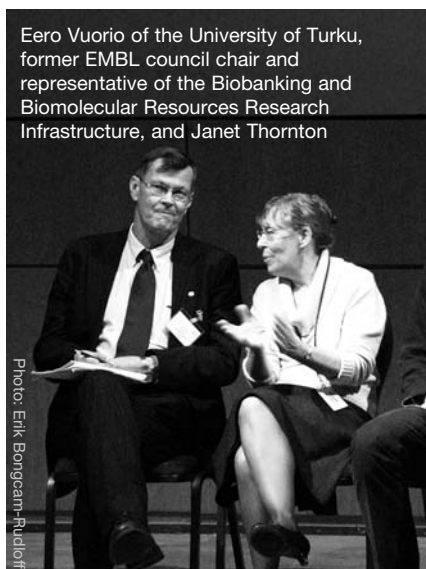
The meeting began with presentations on each of the other ESFRI biomedical science projects, spanning structural biology, biobanking, mouse models, translational medicine and clinical research. As each of these infrastructures will generate enormous amounts of data, it is important that ELIXIR establishes links with them so that different types of data can be shared and integrated in the future.

These were followed by an overview of the progress made by ELIXIR to date. EMBL-EBI Director Janet Thornton highlighted the contacts made with scientists in the member states and with national funding agencies, and input that has been gathered to shape the eventual structure of ELIXIR. "The challenge of ELIXIR is to combine existing data resources to create an

infrastructure that is still sensitive to national research strategies and differences in funding mechanisms. The scope of ELIXIR needs to be far-reaching but also practical," she said.

The stakeholder meeting coincides with the release of a short DVD documentary where Janet presents the need for ELIXIR. If you are able to distribute these DVDs to your national funding contacts, please contact ELIXIR administrator Holly Edwards (holly.edwards@ebi.ac.uk).

– Louisa Wright



Eero Vuorio of the University of Turku, former EMBL council chair and representative of the Biobanking and Biomolecular Resources Research Infrastructure, and Janet Thornton

Photo: Erik Bongemann-Rudloff

EMBL-EBI's Masters Open Day goes bi-annual

EMBL-EBI held its second Masters Open Day of the year on 3 November, timed in order to more effectively support recruitment for the EMBL International PhD Programme.

Forty bioinformatics-related Masters students and supervisors spent the day learning about the EBI and sampling some of our services and research. A variety of lectures provided an overview of our activities, an introduction to the EIPP and an insight into our research. A lunchtime demonstration session, involving ten of the EBI's main bioinformatics resources, gave the students the opportunity to explore the databases and tools of most relevance to their work and to question the experts.

The next Masters Open Day will be held at the EBI on 19 March 2009. If you're involved in teaching bioinformatics Masters students and would like them to be added to the mailing list, email training@ebi.ac.uk. – Louisa Wright

All systems go

The last-minute loss of a keynote speaker at this year's EMBL/EMBO Science and Society Conference did nothing to detract from the excellent programme on 'Systems and Synthetic Biology: Scientific and Social Implications' at EMBL Heidelberg on 7-8 November.

One highlight of the systems biology part was the talk by Leroy Hood of the Institute for Systems Biology in the USA, who first coined the term in the 1980s. The shoes of another founding father of systems biology, Denis Noble, were amply filled by other experts including Tom Kirkwood of the UK's Centre for Systems Biology of Aging. Synthetic biology was also represented by prominent figures such as Doron Lancet from the Weizmann Institute and David Deamer of the University of California.

The lectures and panel discussions moved from the relatively new and very 'hot' concept of systems biology to synthetic methods via ethical implications and governmental policy, with opinions from all sides being heard, be it scientific, societal or philosophical.

"It's fantastically important that we look at these problems with a broader perspective, which is why conferences like these are invaluable," commented Tom Kirkwood, who challenged the audience that the main issue our society faces is the impact of an aging population.

"I've been rewriting my lecture notes, which is always the sign of an excellent conference," said the University of Edinburgh's Joyce Tait as she took to the stage to talk about the governance of synthetic biology.

A service of EpiC proportions

Pre- and postdocs! Do you need to design an antibody, but don't know where to start? Or perhaps you do know, and you know too that it'll take an endless slog through websites to choose the right tools, pinpoint the analysis you need and find all the related annotations?

Postdoc Niall Haslam from EMBL Heidelberg's Gibson Team has made the whole process less painful with a new online resource, <http://epic.embl.de>. In a simple, question-by-question format, EpiC collates and presents a structure-function summary of your protein to help you design antibodies appropriate to your experiments. All you need is your protein sequence or UniProt ID and an idea of the type of experiment you want to do, and EpiC – an initiative of the FP6-funded ProteomeBinders project – will do the rest.

"It's quite hard for wetlab researchers to stay abreast of the latest tools and analysis

techniques they need for making antibodies," says Niall. "The methods are out there, but at the moment you have to search multiple remote servers to find what you need. EpiC automates this, doing most of the decision making for you, which can be essential if you're new to all this."

EpiC chooses the most appropriate tool – and automatically the most up-to-date version – and collects and displays the results and annotation information by searching through resources across Europe, from Split to Stockholm via the EBI. EpiC gets the data, leaving you to concentrate on the interpretation!

Though EpiC is already up and running, development is ongoing and Niall is keen to receive feedback from users to help him continue refining the service. Give it a try at <http://epic.embl.de>, and e-mail Niall at haslam@embl.de if you have any suggestions.

fromthesistersciences

A Christmas mystery

It's that time of year again! Pondering the traditions of Yuletide, we asked a European Space Agency expert to speculate about what the star of Bethlehem could have been

Behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem. Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.' (Matthew 2:i-ii). Science can't prove that the Christmas star ever existed, but it can help us investigate what it might have been if it did. Could something unusual have appeared in the night sky 2,000 years ago?

Mark Kidger, an astronomer at the European Space Astronomy Centre in Madrid, has been pondering this question. He's the author of two books, *Astronomical Enigmas: Life on Mars, the Star of Bethlehem, and Other Milky Way Mysteries*, and *Cosmological Enigmas*.

Venus

"If you take a look at the sky shortly after sunset on Christmas Eve this year and face south-west, you will see two brilliant 'stars': a faint one low above the horizon, and a brighter one higher up," explains Mark. "These are actually the planets Jupiter and the stunningly brilliant Venus." Could this have been what the Magi saw?

Not Venus

It's unlikely, as Mark explains. "The Magi would have descended from a long line of sky-watchers who for centuries had studied the movements of stars and planets. They would have been familiar with Venus in particular and could not conceivably have mistaken it for a new star."

Many other theories have been proposed over the years. The most enduring ones have been a stellar explosion (a nova or supernova), an unusual planetary configuration or a comet. How can we eliminate impossibilities or decide which theory is most probable?

Crap at maths

"A good starting point is to calculate when the star appeared," says Mark. "The birth of Christ

has actually been dated to 5 or 6 BC according to the death of King Herod, which took place one or two years later after a lunar eclipse on 13-14 March in 4 BC. This date agrees with the one deduced by the monk Dionysius Exiguus in 525 AD, who counted back through the reigns of Roman emperors to reach 25 December 1 AD; his calendar, though, jumped from 1 BC to 1 AD, missing the year zero, and he also forgot to include the four years during which Augustus Caesar reigned under the name of Octavian."

Comet

Astronomers and historians have spent many years examining ancient records to see if any phenomenon was observed around 5 BC. Babylonian astronomical records are only fragmentary, but many Chinese observations of eclipses, meteor showers, sunspots, comets, novae and supernovae still exist, and were often highly detailed; Halley's Comet was carefully recorded when it appeared, but that was in the autumn of 12 BC, and nothing that the Chinese observed for three hundred years around the date of the Nativity is spectacular enough to have been a supernova – the death of a massive star – which leaves a glowing cloud of expanding dust and gas, called a nebula, which would still be visible today.

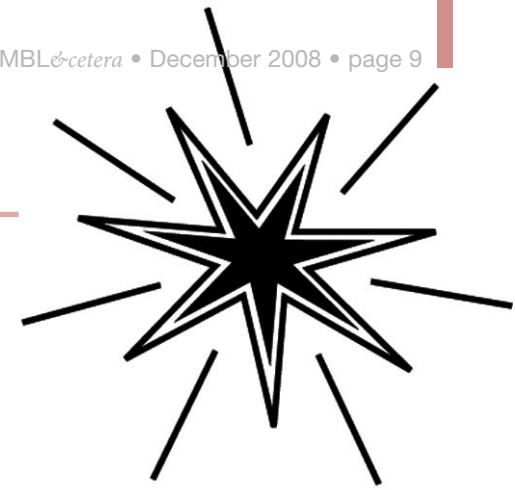
Better at planets

Unlike the Chinese, though, the Babylonians recorded planets and their configurations. A Babylonian chronicle in the British Museum in London shows a month-by-month record of the positions of the planets in 7 BC and lists two very special phenomena: a triple conjunction and a planetary massing.

"A conjunction occurs when two planets, moving at different speeds, come close together for a few nights," explains Mark. "A triple conjunction is when two planets approach and pass each other three times over a period of several months. Every year there are about twenty normal conjunctions, but a triple conjunction only happens about once every 150 years."

Sign

The Babylonian diary describes a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of Pisces that took place between May and



November in 7 BC. "Visually, it would not have been much of a spectacle, but to an astrologer, it would have been rich in meaning: the planet of kings (Jupiter) met the bringer of change (Saturn)," says Mark. "As 7 BC ended, Mars (the planet of war) also moved into the same constellation. By February 6 BC, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn formed a tight grouping – a planetary massing.

"For Babylonian priest-astrologers, or Magi, the meaning of this could not have been clearer: a new king would be born who would overthrow the old order and bring war to the Holy Land. They were just waiting for a final, definitive sign as to when this would happen."

Chinese

That's where the Chinese chroniclers can help again. According to them, in March and April of 5 BC, an object appeared close to the stars Alpha and Beta Capricornii. "It was visible for more than 10 weeks in permanently cloudy skies, suggesting that it must have been a particularly bright object," explains Mark. "The human eye makes very bright stars appear to have rays coming out of them so that they seem large and cometary – and, indeed, the Chinese called it a 'hui-hsing', a comet or supernova. But with a fixed position over weeks or months, and no trace of a corresponding supernova in the sky today, they were almost certainly reporting an extremely bright nova, or new star."

Gas

A nova is actually pair of old stars, the smaller of which is sucking gas off the larger one. As the gas accumulates on the surface of the small star it gets hotter and hotter, until there is a violent explosion and the excess gas is blown off into space. The sudden 'birth' of a brilliant new star blazing in the East in the pre-dawn sky would have told the Magi that the Messiah whom they sought had, finally, been born.

Mince pie

While we can't prove that this bright nova was the Star of Bethlehem, the time that it appeared and the position in the sky make it plausible – if that's what you like to believe, anyway. We're off for a mince pie and a large glass of brandy butter...



Alumni facts...
EMBL's largest body
of alumni were in Cell
Biology (740).

Juggling science and fun

In his last board meeting in November, Angus Lamond stepped down after six years as Alumni Association Chair. "If EMBL is paradise, you could say that leaving it is hell. That makes me, as Chair, Satan," he once joked.

This title will now go to Angus' successor, Giulio Superti-Furga who was elected Chair with Niovi Santama as Deputy Chair in the last meeting. Angus wished them and the board good luck in taking the association forward in future. "It was a privilege for me to have had this opportunity, and many thanks to everyone who helped with our activities over the past years," he concluded.

Under Angus' leadership, the association has grown to 1,413 members with 6 active local chapters. He will be remembered not only for everything he has done for the association, but also for his sense of fun, which made the board meetings so lively and entertaining.

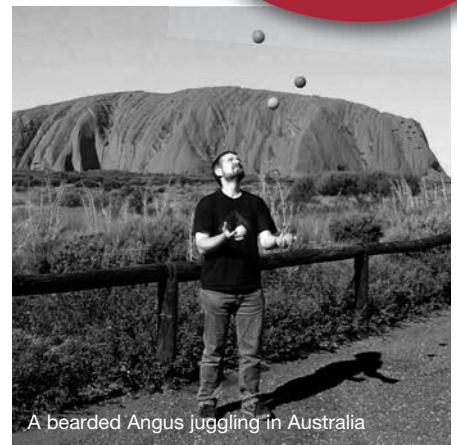
"My motto has always been that science should be fun!" says Angus, who started at EMBL at the tender age of 27 as a group

leader and later senior scientist in the Gene Expression unit. "EMBL showed me that it was possible to stick to this philosophy and still be (relatively) successful."

It's a motto that Angus has retained to-date, 13 years after leaving EMBL. His lab, in the new research centre which he established at Dundee University, attracts co-workers from all over the world. Indeed, Angus notes that "my laboratory is currently even more international than it was at EMBL!"

Their Lamondlab.com website won the Judge's Choice Award in The Scientist's 2007 Laboratory Website Awards, and is well worth a visit. Here you'll find not only information on 'The Science', but also 'The Fun', as well as footage of Angus indulging in his hobby – juggling!

Angus' advice to people leaving EMBL? "Remember to really enjoy what you are doing (science should be fun!) and value and respect your colleagues. Finally, surround



A bearded Angus juggling in Australia

yourself with people who are much more talented than you are, and feel no shame in taking vicarious credit for their abilities!

"Last but not least, remember to join the Alumni Association, and keep in touch."

Iain Mattaj and Matthias Hentze thanked Angus at the board dinner for his fantastic work in running the Association.

Read Angus' account of 'Life after EMBL' on the alumni wiki, www.embl.org/alumni/wiki.

– Mehrnoosh Rayner

John Kendrew award 2009



An exciting part of the Alumni Association board meeting on 3 November was the selection of the John Kendrew Award winner 2009. The already demanding task of comparing the achievements of scientists from different fields was made even more difficult by the outstanding quality of the candidates.

The board selected Julius Brennecke, a former predoc in Developmental Biology from 2001-2006, who's now a postdoc at the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in the USA, for his revolutionary contributions to RNA silencing. Julius and his colleagues were the first to use computational methods to identify microRNA-regulated mRNAs successfully; to identify the biological logic of microRNA

regulation of gene expression including the identification of physiological miRNA targets; to implicate microRNAs in providing robustness and noise suppression to biological circuits; to discover the 'ping-pong' mechanism for piRNA amplification; and to characterise the piRNA pathways as a genomic 'immune system' and as the molecular basis of the hybrid dysgenesis phenomenon. Julius has also taken time out for active conservation biology work in the Galapagos Islands and the Serengeti, Tanzania.

Julius will take up a group leader position at the Institute of Molecular Biotechnology in Vienna in January 2009. He will receive his award and present a public lecture describing his work at EMBL's lab day on 18 June.

– Giulio Superti-Furga

www.embl.org/alumni

Alumni Association election results

Thank you to the 274 Alumni Association members who voted in the board elections between 15 August and 30 September. The

New members	Continuing members
Giulio Superti-Furga	Annalisa Pastore
Maria del Mar Vivanco	Freddy Frischknecht
Anastasia Politou	Bernard Hoflack
Anastasios Koutsos	Colin Dingwall
Cedric Notredame	Claudia Koch-Brandt
	Niovi Santama
Treasurer	Giovanni Paoletta
Oscar Martin-Almendral	Oddmund Bakke

results are below. All the successful candidates accepted their positions and attended the 12th Alumni Association board meeting at EMBL Heidelberg on 3 November, where they elected Giulio Superti-Furga as the new Chair and Niovi Santama as Deputy Chair.

The board were delighted that Andreas Jenny and Patricia Rogriguez have agreed to act as Local Chapter Organisers for the USA and Italy respectively.

Kai Simons turns 70

On 10-12 November, the MPI of Molecular Cell Biology and Genetics in Dresden celebrated the 70th birthday of former EMBL Cell Biology unit head Kai Simons with a symposium, 'Principles of Cell and Tissue Organization'. The event acknowledged Kai's scientific contribution and his political role in promoting cell biology worldwide and in supporting young investigators in Europe. Speakers included a number of EMBL alumni; see www.mpi-cbg.de/rafts for details.

newsinbrief

❑ **Registration is now open** for the EBI's hands-on bioinformatics training courses in early 2009: Sequence to Genes: Genome Informatics (16-18 March); Programmatic Access to Biological Databases (27-29 April); and our introductory course 'A walk through EBI Bioinformatics Resources' (11-15 May). Visit www.ebi.ac.uk/training/handson for more details and to register.

❑ **Fourteen group leaders** from EMBL-EBI gathered at Down Hall Hotel in Bishop's Stortford on 5-6 November for the institute's first research group leader retreat. "EBI is growing steadily, with many of new groups doing research rather than, or in addition to, providing services," explained Nicolas Le Novère. "Everyone enjoyed the retreat and we've decided to make it a bi-annual event in the future."

❑ **On 13-14 November Ava Yeo** (Director of Operations), Sally Leever (Academic Tutor) and Erin Fortin (Research Manager for Graduate Studies) from the London Research Institute, a Cancer Research UK laboratory, paid EMBL Heidelberg a visit to



Photo: Marietta Schupp

exchange ideas about pre- and postdoctoral training and careers guidance. The visitors also had a chance to chat to EMBL postdocs.

❑ **Other recent visits included** the Bettencourt-Schueller Foundation, which aims to create a new centre for the life sciences and medicine in Paris and visited EMBL to get some ideas on 17 October, and the Swedish Research Council on 27-28 October.

❑ **EMBL's European Learning Laboratory** for the Life Sciences (ELLS) has been awarded a three-year grant by the Robert Bosch Stiftung to become part of the foundation's 'NaT-Working' initiative (Networking High School Students, Teachers and Scientists in the Natural Sciences and Technology). In a

project called iNEXT – Interaktives Netzwerk für Experimentelles Training – ELLS will work with four schools to develop classroom resources according to science teachers' needs. They'll need scientist volunteers to help produce wetlab, bioinformatics and e-learning resources, to name a few, so if you'd like to get involved with that or the initiative's Ambassador Programme, contact Julia Willingale-Theune at willinga@embl.de.

❑ **A scientific writing course** with Jane Fraser, Effective Writing in the Life Sciences, will be held at EMBL Heidelberg on 3-4 February. Register online at <http://training.embl.org/reg/index.php>.

❑ **Good news for Heidelberg non-drivers!** From 14 December an express bus service on a trial basis will support the existing 39 bus route. The buses will run between Bismarckplatz, Bierhelderhof (EMBL) and Boxberg during the peak periods 6am-9am and 4pm-7pm, with buses available to and from EMBL every 30 minutes during these times. The service will be revised after six months – so use it or lose it!



Photo: Christine Panagiotidis

On 17 October the EMBL Kinderhaus parents' panel organised EMBL's first flea market for children's clothes, toys and equipment. The market, which took place during lunchtime in the marquee outside the main entrance, was so successful so that the organisers immediately decided to arrange another one in spring (date to be confirmed). So don't miss your chance to spruce up the little one's summer outfit.

– Corinna Gorny

A life aquatic

The ELLS stand at Science Days 2008, held on 9-11 October at the Europa-Park near Rust, Germany, really drew the crowds.

With the help of EMBL postdoc Petra Haas and six students from the Berthavon-Suttner high school in Ettlingen, SET-Routes Programme Administrator Philipp Gebhardt displayed an eye-catching pyramid of aquariums containing zebrafish and Medaka mutants. A huge number of the festival's 22,000 visitors stopped by to observe the first stages of fish development in real time under the microscope.

The stand also featured a life-size photographic backdrop to make visitors feel they were standing in a real lab, and showed a movie Philipp made of some of EMBL's latest findings, which included the 'digital embryo' published by the Stelzer and Wittbrodt labs on the first day of the event. Science Days, a major science festival aimed at visitors of all ages, has been attracting thousands annually since 2000.



from the Staff Association

❑ As outlined on page 6, the **Winter Council meeting** approved improvements to overtime rules, education and installation grants. Wording changes were also made to the removal costs and unemployment insurance rules to make them clearer. Furthermore, the signing period for newly issued contracts was significantly changed. See www.embl-heidelberg.de/~staff/news/randchanges.htm for full details.

❑ Saturday 13 December: **the EMBL Heidelberg Christmas Party**. Santa Claus will be making a special appearance. Tickets cover a wonderful buffet of international Christmas dishes as well as entertainment

from Freddy Wonder and his band – so bring your dancing shoes!

❑ Saturday, 14 February: **Burns Night**. Get ready for the Scottish party of the year – the longest-running annual event for Heidelberg – featuring exotic whisky, bagpipes, haggis, Scottish country dancing and much more.

❑ The Staff Association covers all categories of staff and has representatives at all outstations. Keep up-to-date with these and other events at www.embl-heidelberg.de/~staff (for EMBL pensioners, www.embl-heidelberg.de/~staff/pensioners). – Catherine Floyd

people@EMBL



New team leader **John Overington** will oversee the development of large-scale medicinal chemistry databases at EMBL-EBI. He studied chemistry at the University of Bath, and after a PhD at Birkbeck College and a postdoc at Cancer Research UK he joined Pfizer, where he established the structural biology group and integrated bioinformatics analysis into new target research. In 2000, John joined Inpharmatica, where he worked on database and software application development, and joins the EBI following the transfer of the Galapagos database to the public domain earlier this year.

Antje Seeck is returning to EMBL Heidelberg's Courses and Conferences Office after her maternity leave as its new Marketing Officer. In this newly-created role, she will promote the scientific conferences, workshops and courses held at EMBL and develop a marketing strategy to maximise the Advanced Training Centre's capacity utilisation. Antje studied International Business at Maastricht University and held several marketing positions in organisations including the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and Siemens, before coming to EMBL.



events@EMBL

15 December EMBL Heidelberg
Science and Society: "Seeing Science": Alyssa A. Goodman, Harvard University

16 December EMBL Heidelberg
External speaker: Small RNA pathways in the germline. Alexei Aravin, CSH

16 December EMBL Heidelberg
External speaker: Collective patterns in biology: Synchrony dynamics in the segmentation clock as revealed by quantitative gene perturbation. Ingmar Riedel-Kruse, CIT

17 December EMBL Heidelberg
External speaker: Zebrafish visual system development and function: imaging studies. Filippo Del Bene, UCSF

19 December EMBL Monterotondo
Science and Society: Neural Plasticity and Consciousness: why you are not your brain. Alva Noe, University of Berkeley

15-16 January Atlantic Hotel, Heidelberg
Chemical biology retreat

19-22 January EMBL-EBI
Course: Transcriptomics Resources and Data Analysis

12-13 February EMBL Monterotondo
Heads of Units/Senior Scientists Meeting

For more details about these events and more, visit www.embl.org/events.

Upcoming free courses in the EMBL Non-Scientific Training and Development Programme include:

Course	Date
PILOT Project management II	14 Jan (EBI)
Interviewing Skills	20 Jan (HD)
Conflict Management	21 Jan (EBI)
Illustrator Introduction	21 Jan (EBI)
Photoshop Basics	21-22 Jan (HD)
Dealing with stress and pressure	22 Jan (HD)
Access Beginners	3-4 Feb (HD)
Understanding personality: MBTI	12 Feb (EBI)
Illustrator	16-17 Feb (HD)
Advanced Presentation Skills	16-17 Feb (HH)
Effective Team Leader – part 1	17-18 Feb (HD)

Visit www.embl.org/staffonly/personnel/training_dev/index.html for more details.

★ EMBL Heidelberg will be offering a reduced-price **German course for PhD students only** in February–March. If you would like to register, please contact td@embl.de by 30 January 2009.



Great, we've won more beer!

EMBL Heidelberg's Oktoberfest on 11 October included music from the city's Blasmusik Band, lots of food and drink and prizes for the teams that excelled in the traditional Bavarian games, which included 'Baumstamm Nageln'. This bizarre pastime involves hammering nails into a tree trunk, a task at which EMBO's Kim Krynauw and Liselott Maidment and guest Jamie Litchfield proved expert.

awards&honours

EMBL Heidelberg Gene Expression group leader **Maja Köhn** has received the Friedrich Weygand Prize, which is awarded to one up-and-coming young scientist in bioorganic chemistry or peptide chemistry every year, from the Max Bergmann Circle. Maja gave her prize lecture, 'Herstellungsstrategien und Applikationen von Peptid- und Wirkstoff-Arrays' and received the award at the 29th Max-Bergmann-Konferenz in Grindelwald, Switzerland at the beginning of October.

Former EMBL DG **Fotis C. Kafatos**, now Chair of Immunogenomics at Imperial College and first President of the European Research Council, has been awarded a special lifetime achievement prize by the Louis-Jeantet Foundation, a Swiss-based organisation that provides funding and major prizes for biomedical research. It recognises his major contributions to the development of European biomedical research as well as his exceptional research into the biology of the Anopheles mosquito, the carrier of the malaria parasite Plasmodium. He received the award at a ceremony in Geneva on 9 October.

On 24 October at a ceremony at the Bode Museum in Berlin, joint head of EMBL Heidelberg's Structural and Computational Biology unit **Peer Bork** was one of three scientists to receive a Mentoring in Science award from *Nature*. These awards focus on a specific country each year, and speakers at the ceremony included Dr. Annette Schavan, the Federal Minister of Education and Research for Germany. Peer, who won the Mid-career Achievement Award, was nominated for "his exceptional leadership ability and enthusiastic and responsible way of mentoring," according to the judges.