

AstraZeneca arrays academic assets in Pfizer defence

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RISING up from the fields around the university city of Cambridge, the steel towers of the Laboratory of Molecular Biology are scientific pillars in the defence that drugs group AstraZeneca is mounting against a takeover approach by its US rival Pfizer.

The lab's four towers — clearly visible from arriving trains — help keep vibrations and noise away from highly sensitive equipment. Scientists who work there have said it is "simply too dangerous" to let AstraZeneca be bought by the American group.

AstraZeneca plans to move its own research and corporate headquarters to the plot next door to the lab, which has earned 10 Nobel prizes. The company is emphasizing a strategic research alliance it has agreed with the laboratory's owner, the publicly funded Medical Research Council (MRC). AstraZeneca says it wants the relationship to be symbiotic.

The group — subject of a + \$100-billion-plus bid approach from Pfizer — hopes the collaboration can help accelerate the development of new, ground-breaking drugs and revitalise its business, placing it at the core of a growing cluster of expertise around Cambridge.

The site is due to be completed in 2016. Other large drugmakers have built research outposts in Cambridge and US life science centres like Boston and San Francisco, but none have undertaken such a wholesale move of operations.



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While Pfizer says it will complete the planned research centre if it buys AstraZeneca, it has not said how many staff it will have in Cambridge or elsewhere.

AstraZeneca's Cambridge ambitions go further than simply relocating its scientists and top management in a leading university town. Under the deal with the MRC, the drugmaker will give academics access to more than two million molecules in AstraZeneca's compound library, which they can develop as they will, giving AstraZeneca first refusal on any potential drugs.

"This is what I've always asked for," said Hugh Pelham, director of the biology lab, which is known as MRC LMB.

The arrangement will appeal to scientists' professional ambitions, by encouraging research for publication in scientific journals, "crossing the road between academia and industry" and even stim-

ulating some to start their own companies, he told visiting journalists last week.

When it comes to sparking great scientific ideas, much depends on human connections which have been years in the making, Pelham said.

AstraZeneca's small existing biotech operation in Cambridge, known as MedImmune, has roots going back 25 years to the time when a scientist-led company, Cambridge Antibody Technology, was spun out from the big MRC biology lab.

"There are people there that we know. People are married to people there," Pelham said. Being near to each other — cycling to work together — is a "very significant cultural feature of Cambridge".

More than 1,600 firms have been created as a result of collaborations between academia and the private sector in Cambridge, and the university's £4.9-billion (\$8.25 billion) collective endowment is Europe's largest. *Reuters*

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