



Peter Agre, President of AAAS, Nobel Prize for Chemistry, 2003.

## A MODEST MASTER

Peter Agre is the President of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and currently heads up the Malaria Research Institute at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. He was awarded a Nobel Prize for his discovery of aquaporins, the long sought after water channel proteins, in 1991. His discovery, as well as his Norwegian

heritage, has led him into a longstanding collaboration with aquaporins researchers at Oslo's centre for excellence in neuroscience.

Modesty, according to Peter Agre, is the characteristic that best defines the Norwegians. And in talking to the recipient of the 2003 Nobel Prize for Chemistry, it quickly becomes apparent that it is a trait he has inherited from his Scandinavian ancestors. He hastens to explain that his Nobel Prize-winning research was serendipitous – he stumbled upon the water channel proteins by accident whilst trying to purify blood group antigens – and lavishes praise on the work of others, not least his colleagues at the University of Oslo's Centre for Molecular Biology and Neuroscience (CMBN).

"I've just turned 60 and over the last several years, I've intentionally downsized my own laboratory to a very tiny group, but I've gotten involved in many national efforts. I've interacted closely with the University of Oslo group and they've got a dynamite team," he says. "Ole Petter Ottersen, the group leader, has now just been elected rector of University of Oslo, so his younger scientists will have to step up in increasingly prominent leadership roles, but they're very good."

Among those he admires he lists Erlend Nagelhus and Mahmood Amiry-Moghaddam – both outstanding neuroscientists who have pioneered the pinpoint localisation of aquaporins in the brain, identifying their role in the prevention of epileptic seizures and brain damage after injury. "Of course, this is basic research, but their accomplishments are astonishingly important. Norway should continue to invest and to look for the human consequences of water transport in brain. And I think they are world leaders in this area," he says.

## NANSEN NEUROSCIENCE NETWORK LAUNCHED

Following the success of Oslo Cancer Cluster, a new network based on another area Norway can justifiably claim world class advances is making its US debut at BIO2009. The Nansen Neuroscience Network will seek partnerships that can benefit from its strengths in:

**Brain physiology** – research on aging and DNA-repair, glutamate excitotoxicity and aquaporins at CMBN

**In vivo neuroimaging** – "translational R&D" in the crossroads between academia, industry and hospital in Trondheim

**Biobanks and biomarkers** – opportunities with the Cohort of Norway and HUNT Biosciences

**Memory and cognitive functions** – frontline research at The Kavli Inst for Systems Neuroscience

**Preventive medicine** – marine lipids and other supplements

*Key founder members include CMBN (Oslo) MI Lab, Trondheim and Innovation Norway*

Of course, Agre's chance discovery provides the very foundation on which their work has been built. But by his own admission, he was not aware of the wide ranging significance of his findings for a long time. "When we figured out it was the water transport molecule, I was surprised how much interest this provoked among other scientists," he recalls. "But the work developed, and the consequences became better understood - the importance of water channels and water transport in brain and secretory glands, and kidney function, and airways. People started to comment that this could be the Nobel Prize, but I chose to delay any celebrations until it was evident that this had happened. I was like the naive farm boy, probably not dissimilar to the Norwegian farmers who came to the United States 100 years ago to work the land - you do your job and try to take care of things and don't get too boastful about it."

Agre views Norway's success in neuroscience as a continuation of the work of one of Norway's most renowned citizens - 19th century Arctic explorer and scientist, Fridtjof Nansen, who carried out pioneering work on nerve cells. "While Nansen may not register in the stratosphere with Bono and Madonna and people like that, I think that among scientific people he

registers very high," he says. "I have the awe of a young person watching an outstanding programme and enjoying it greatly, by curiosity but also as a colleague."

In his role as a "cheerleader" for science, Agre tries to encourage young people to see science the way he thinks Nansen did - as an adventure. Whilst in his own country, this continues to be something of a thankless task, as numbers pursuing careers in science fall year on year, he believes Norway has a great advantage in this respect. Having recently attended the CMBN conference in Hafjell, he has been impressed by the many young Norwegian scientists who he saw present excellent work. Of course, he adds, being Norwegians, they tend to be a little shy.

Having once toyed with idea of running for the Senate himself, Agre is also keen to encourage more scientists to go into politics. "I think that we're going to see more and more from the Scandinavians - the Norwegians, and the Swedes to some extent - in international diplomacy. It's not surprising to me that the big climate meeting will be in Copenhagen in December. Again, the world's eyes will be on Scandinavia and the Norwegians will play a role, definitely."

#### NORDIAG LAUNCHES AN ARROW

NorDiag will be spotlighting its new automated DNA isolation desktop instrument - the NorDiag Arrow at BIO2009. In addition to blood, urine, tissue and sputum, the Arrow has an isolation procedure for DNA from stool samples available, and is particularly well suited for DNA isolation upfront of colorectal cancer screening. NorDiag is looking for partners where the stool and urine preps and possibly NorDiag's colorectal cancer marker can be used for colorectal cancer screening.

For more information visit [www.nordiag.com](http://www.nordiag.com)

#### AFFITECH MERGES WITH PHARMEXA TO FORM NEW ANTIBODY POWERHOUSE

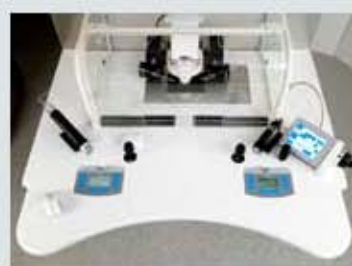
In May Affitech AS merged with Danish company Pharmexa to form a new antibody powerhouse. The new company will develop a primarily oncology-focused clinical pipeline fuelled by both own discoveries and in-licensed candidates. Achim Kaufhold will be CEO, with current Affitech CEO Martin Welschhof becoming CSO. The merger also gives Affitech a listing on the Copenhagen Stock Exchange.

For more information visit [www.affitech.com](http://www.affitech.com)

#### PCI BIOTECH-LED CONSORTIUM AWARDED USD 1.5 M EUROSTARS GRANT FOR SIRNA ONCOLOGY

A PCI Biotech-led consortium focused on effective siRNA cancer drug delivery has been ranked 3rd out of more than 300 European projects and will receive € 1.1 million in funding from the EU Eurostars Programme. The consortium comprises three companies PCI Biotech, SpectraCure and siRNAsense. Read more at [www.pci-biotech.com](http://www.pci-biotech.com) and [www.simasense.com](http://www.simasense.com)

#### CELLCURA UNVEILS IVF WORKSTATION



With studies showing that controlled environments improve IVF success rates, Norwegian specialist CellCura has developed an intelligent modular workstation. The CellCura workstation controls and monitors the work environment for cell handling, allows quick and accurate morphological assessment of reproductive cells and provides intuitive track and trace for procedures and utensils used.

For more information visit [www.cellcura.com](http://www.cellcura.com)

#### HUNT APPOINTS FOSS

HUNT Biosciences has appointed former GE Healthcare director Per Foss as its new CEO. For both pharmaceutical and biotech companies, HUNT Biosciences is ideally positioned to devise biomarker strategies across a wide range of key disease areas such as type II diabetes, osteoporosis, cancer. Visit [www.huntbiosciences.com](http://www.huntbiosciences.com)

#### OPTINOSE PRESENTS NEW CHRONIC RHINOSINUSITIS TREATMENT DATA

OptiNose has announced important new results from a Phase II trial of its novel nasal drug delivery device with fluticasone for the treatment of chronic rhinosinusitis. Patients in the active treatment group experienced significant improvements in nasal symptoms, nasal discomfort and sense of smell. For more information visit [www.optinose.no](http://www.optinose.no)