



Doris Meder

Straight talk with... Doris Meder and Geert Van Minnebruggen

After years spent battling to keep their institutes equipped with the latest technologies—which were arriving on the market faster than budgets could keep pace with—Doris Meder and Geert Van Minnebruggen had a brainwave. The two core facility directors decided to create an alliance to change the way large-scale research infrastructure for the life sciences is shared. Their dream was to team up core facilities across the EU so that institutes could pool resources to buy state-of-the-art machines as soon as the tools became available. To that end, Meder, head of core facilities at the Centre for Genomic Regulation (CRG) in Barcelona, Spain, and Van Minnebruggen, integration manager at the Vlaams Instituut voor Biotechnologie (VIB) in Flanders, Belgium, founded Core for Life (C4L), a pan-European project to facilitate this type of sharing. They formally announced the network's launch on 14 May.

Thus far, they've enlisted four other like-minded core facility managers—from the European Molecular Biology Laboratory in Heidelberg, Germany; the Campus Science Support Facilities in Vienna, Austria; the Max Planck Institute of Molecular Cell Biology and Genetics in Dresden, Germany; and the Functional Genomics Centre Zurich in Switzerland. They've also created a handful of working groups focused on assessing the best new equipment in designated scientific disciplines and developing new ways to put that equipment to use. **Katharine Sanderson** spoke with Meder and Van Minnebruggen about how they hope to democratize access to the very latest technologies for life scientists.

Can you offer an example of how an alliance of core laboratories could improve access to research platforms and equipment?

DM: We might have a few scientists at one institute who are interested in electron tomography, for example, but it isn't worth their institute investing [in this technology]. However, if five more institutes are also interested, you have a broad enough user base to support the instrument.

GVM: So, if CRG planned to buy a €1 million [\$1.3 million] machine and they foresee a capacity in their own community of 60%, one or two

other partners could make a financial commitment for another 20%. This is a smart decision.

Will the network remain just six institutes?

DM: No, there is a big need for a much broader group. We don't want to appear as an elite club, but for now we need to do some groundwork, which we can only do as long as we can sit around one table. In the future we would like a two-layer structure. The inner circle will make the legal and financial decisions and govern the project, whereas the outer layer would include a larger number of scientists who actually work in core facilities and have the day-to-day expertise of using those technologies and designing experiments.

How will C4L's finances work?

GVM: C4L is a nonprofit organization. For now, we have no real funding from a funding body or government. In the short term, we will have a membership fee from all partners to finance meetings with the [individual core facility] directors and the workgroups.

In order for life scientists to tap into the Core for Life network, do they have to be at one of the partner institutes?

DM: No. The six C4L partner institutes already open their services to the whole community [of life scientists in academia and industry worldwide]. We aim to make this easier and more visible. The C4L website will be the main entry portal, with platforms and technologies to choose from at each partner institute. Just by contacting the facility head in one institute, he or she could provide you with all the technologies available in C4L.

Contract research organizations offer many of the same services as core facilities and are available for hire when scientists can't find services at their host institutions. So why bother starting a new pan-European project across academic centers?

GVM: The vision and mission of commercial companies is not completely aligned with the vision of academia and research institutes. These companies will process your samples, and in the end you get real raw data. But none of them get involved in guiding the PIs [principal investigators], setting up the experiments and tackling the right parameters to find out what real core data are needed.

Core for Life held its first genomics working group meeting in March, and other technology working groups devoted to proteomics, bioinformatics, drug screening and other fields look set to have gatherings soon. How do these groups assist with C4L's larger mission?

GVM: It helps to have working groups on specific topics to scout new technologies. For example, the microscopy guys will have a meeting in the second half of this year focused on bringing together light microscopy and electron microscopy [which allows scientists to look at cell structure and function at the same time]. Other working groups are discussing management systems for tracking samples from submission to data output to invoice. In September, we will have our next retreat to bring together the results for the entire community.

What are your plans for C4L within the coming year?

DM: To develop networks for career development, including a job portal on the website. Also, to engage with funding agencies to help develop more practical models for administrating core facilities' funding. In the future, we want C4L to be a reference for anything to do with core facilities, although that doesn't mean we will be able to answer technologically every request that comes up. It's not only about providing services but also about providing consultation on how to set up a core facility and how to decide which technologies to buy.