

Myelin structure and its role in autoimmunity (MARIE)

an ESF Scientific Network

This Network is galvanising European research into the role of myelin and its structure in a range of autoimmune degenerative diseases such as multiple sclerosis (MS). Myelin is the multi-layered membrane sheath rich in lipids (fats) providing the electrical insulation for axons, whose deterioration causes disease by disrupting the conduction of nerve impulses. Myelin structural research over the past 30 years is being rekindled by recent progress in a variety of key fields, notably biophysics, electron and scanning probe microscopy, x-ray crystallography, and bioinformatics. However, Europe's research effort in the field is fragmented and dominated by traditional specialists in neuroimmunology and cell biology. It is now recognised that collaboration between both traditional and newer fields in the biophysical and computational domains is necessary to make substantial progress, and this Network is conducting the task. There is great hope of success following a highly promising exploratory workshop in Potenza, Italy in June 2002, which brought together researchers from all the component fields, including 54 from Europe and 16 from North America, and also existing practitioners of MS therapies. This workshop concluded that the overwhelming priority was to decipher how myelin is made in order to unravel how the mechanisms of assembly and function go wrong in the event of disease.

Building upon historical research, an important need exists to further develop our understanding of the structural biology, intermolecular interactions and role of myelin proteins. Such knowledge is required to elucidate the pathogenic mechanisms of demyelinating diseases, and in particular the effects of soluble myelinotoxic factors such as cytokines, antibodies, free oxygen radicals and matrix metalloproteinases.

This Network is founded largely on the premise that the time is now ripe for substantial progress following a reinvigoration of research. The ability to delve more deeply into the structures of constituent proteins has become possible through improved crystallisation techniques and progress with imaging via scanning probe microscopy and x-ray diffraction. These techniques will also complement more general approaches employed for the analysis of molecular complexes (e.g., by confocal microscopy). At the same time, a breakthrough in genetic and protein sequence analysis through microarray techniques, allied to data retrieval, analysis and 3D native protein modelling provides the potential to determine the overall structure of myelin and its constituent proteins far more accurately than before. Furthermore, immunological studies have demonstrated the degenerate recognition of antigens by T cells and highlighted the need to understand the structure of the peptides involved in MHC-T cell receptor interplay.

These various breakthroughs have come in several previously distinct fields, and so to exploit them for myelin research requires collaboration between the respective researchers that has not taken place much before. This has proved a sticking

point so far, for it is acknowledged that biophysicists and neuroimmunologists have at times had difficulty understanding each other's presentations, without which collaboration cannot even begin. This Network therefore has three important strategic objectives:

- 1) To promote the interest of biophysicists in structural studies of myelin proteins and of the peptides involved in the antigen presentation, as well as to have neurologists and neuro-immunologists participate more directly in structural studies.
- 2) To develop a common language to facilitate interaction between experts in the different fields.
- 3) To promote the training of young scientists in different fields and develop their ability to organize research projects and carry out experiments with various approaches and techniques.

The ability to form the kind of strong and fruitful interaction between disciplines was demonstrated in the 2002 Exploratory Workshop "Myelin Structure and its Role in Autoimmunity", providing a sound basis for this Network to achieve the following scientific objectives:

- 1) Research on multiple sclerosis and other demyelinating diseases by workers from all fields, including biophysics and bioinformatics, that have so far been under-represented, in addition to those in more established areas involving cell and molecular biology.
- 2) To facilitate interaction among structural biologists interested in the architecture of myelin proteins, in relation to the high-resolution structure of myelin.
- 3) To encourage the synthesis of different kinds of expertise in the fields of biophysics, biochemistry, molecular biology, neurology, neuroimmunology and bioinformatics.
- 4) To exploit knowledge of myelin structure to study its breakdown in demyelinating diseases, and to elucidate how myelinotoxic factors can both attack the myelin sheath and also disrupt the membrane.
- 5) To understand the role of myelin proteins in autoimmunity and the contribution made to this by molecular mimicry, which is a typical structural problem.
- 6) To identify and describe selected techniques in biophysics, biochemistry, and bioinformatics that would be of general interest to all participants in the network, but particularly to young scientists.
- 7) To define multiple sclerosis and autoimmunity and the possible role of myelin proteins in pathology.

All of these objectives require collaboration between specialists in different disciplines and measures to help the various researchers communicate better.

This Network was approved by the ESF Network Group in November 2003 for a three-year period



Steering Committee

Prof. Paolo Riccio (Chair)

*Dept of Biology D.B.A.F.
Università degli Studi della
Basilicata*
Campus Macchia Romana
85100 Potenza
Italy
Tel: +39 0971 205563
Fax: +39 0971 205687
Email: riccio@unibas.it

Prof. Paolo Cavatorta

*Sezione di Biofisica – INFM
Dept of Physics
University of Parma*
Parco Area delle Scienze, 7/A
43100 Parma
Italy
Tel: +39 0521 905254
Fax: +39 0521 905223
Email:
paolo.cavatorta@fis.unipr.it

Dr. Massimo Degano

*Biocrystallography Unit
Dibit Fondazione San Raffaele*
Via Olgettina 58
20132 Milano
Italy
Tel: +39 02 26437152
Fax: +39 02 26434153
Email: degano.massimo@hsr.it

Prof. Hans-Peter Hartung

*Department of Neurology
Heinrich-Heine-Universität*
Moorenstrasse 5
40225 Düsseldorf
Germany
Tel: +49 211 81 17880
Fax: +49 211 81 18469
Email:
hans-peter.hartung@uni-
duesseldorf.de

Dr. Anthony M. Heape

*Dept of Anatomy &
Cell Biology
University of Oulu*
PL 5000 (Aapistie 7)
90014 University of Oulu
Finland
Tel: +358 8 537 51 97
Fax: +358 8 537 51 72
Email: aheape@oulu.fi

Prof. Marie-Paule Lefranc

*IMGT, LIGM, IGH, UPR
CNRS 1142
Université Montpellier II*
141 rue de la Cardonille
34396 Montpellier cedex 5
France
Tel: +33 4 99 61 99 65
Fax: +33 4 99 61 99 01
Email: lefranc@ligm.igh.cnrs.fr

Prof. Chris Linington

*Dept of Medicine and
Therapeutics
Institute of Medical Sciences
University of Aberdeen*
Foresterhill
Aberdeen AB25 2ZD
United Kingdom
Tel: +44 1224 555796
Fax: +44 1224 555766
Email: c.linington@abdn.ac.uk

Prof. Klaus-Armin Nave

*Dept of Neurogenetics
Max-Planck-Institute of
Experimental Medicine*
Hermann-Rein-Strasse 3
37075 Goettingen
Germany
Tel: +49 551 389 9757
Fax: +49 551 389 9758
Email: nave@em.mpg.de

Prof. Ghislain Opendakker

*Dept of Microbiology and
Immunology
Rega Institute for Medical
Research
University of Leuven*
Minderbroederstraat 10
3000 Leuven
Belgium
Tel: +32 16 3373 41
Fax: +32 16 3373 40
Email: ghislain.opdenakker
@rega.kuleuven.ac.be

Prof. Marco Salvetti

*Neurologia, II Facoltà di
Medicina
Osp. S. Andrea, Roma
Università di Roma
"La Sapienza"*
Via di Grottarossa, 1035-1039
00189 Roma
Italy
Tel: +39 06 80345900
Email:
marco.salvetti@uniroma1.it

Dr. Jan Sedzik

*Dept of Biosciences
Karolinska Institutet
NOVUM*
Halsövägen 7
14157 Huddinge
Sweden
Tel: +46 8 6089284
Fax: +46 18 229602
E-mail: jas@biosci.ki.se
Sedzik@swipnet.se

Observers:

Prof. George Harauz

*Department of Molecular
& Cellular Biology
University of Guelph*
Canada
Email: gharauz@uoguelph.ca

Prof. Claude C.A. Bernard

*Neuroimmunology Laboratory
Dept of Biochemistry
La Trobe University*
Bundoora
Australia
Email:
C.Bernard@latrobe.edu.au

Prof. Vladimir Brusic

*Knowledge Discovery Dept
Institute for Infocomm Research*
Singapore
Email:
vladimir@i2r.a-star.edu.sg

Dr. Anthony T. Campagnoni

*Mental Retardation
Research Center
Neuropsychiatric Institute
UCLA School of Medicine*
Los Angeles, CA
United States
Email: acampagnoni
@MEDNET.ucla.edu

Prof. Kazuhiro Ikenaka

*National Institute for
Physiological Sciences*
Okazaki
Japan
Email: ikenaka@nips.ac.jp

Prof. Daniel A. Kirschner

*Dept of Biology
Boston College*
Boston, MA
United States
Email: kirschnd@bc.edu

Dr. Roland Martin

NINDS/NIH
Bethesda, MD
United States
Email: martin@ninds.nih.gov

ESF Liaison

Science:

Dr. Hui Wang

Administration:

Ms. Blanche Schaller-Facchini

Tel: +33 (0)3 88 76 71 18
Fax: +33 (0)3 88 37 05 32
Email: bschaller@esf.org

www.esf.org/marie

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The ESF Network scheme is coordinated from the Foundation's Strasbourg headquarters. For further information contact:
the Networks Secretariat
Tel: +33 (0)3 88 76 71 46 - Fax: +33 (0)3 88 37 05 32 - Email: networks@esf.org

