

## **4 Postdoctoral fellows**

The postdoctoral fellows at the NKI-AVL are invited and take part in the Postdoc Career Development program. This special program has been developed by our postdocs under supervision of Peter Peters, dean since 1999 and has ever since been highly evaluated by all participants.

### **4.1 The mission**

The mission of the 'Postdoc Career Development' is to encourage and assist postdocs and last year PhD students in our institute to make the right move in their next career step and to make our institute more attractive for young talent.

To achieve this, we organize 3 day retreats and 1 day workshops where postdocs can find a break from the lab bench and have stimulating lectures and training by senior peers. Topics at these retreats include: how to succeed as a scientist inside or outside academia; communication skills; setting expectations for yourself; obtaining and negotiating your next position; responsibilities beyond the laboratory; mentoring and being mentored; project management; understanding the national and EU FP7 funding process; getting grants; increasing your visibility; time management; project management; technology transfer and setting up collaborations. Postdocs will work on creating the right career ladder that follows their creativity and passion. This may mean a faculty position or a jump to a new field without to many compromises.

### **4.2 Why a Postdoc Career Development program at the NKI-AVL?**

Postdocs are young researchers with a Ph.D. working in transitional and temporary positions. They play a central role in generating scientific output, contributing to an innovative working environment. Postdocs like to focus on building their career track by having training in transferable skills and by having opportunities to interact with NKI-AVL alumni that are now representatives of scientific institutes and companies. This will broaden the postdocs' knowledge of future career options, thus also enhancing the attractiveness of our institute to international young talent.

The goals of the Postdoc Career Development are:

- To increase postdocs' awareness of their career position and to enhance their transferable skills through training sessions with senior scientists and professionals;
- To bridge the gap between companies and academia;
- To provide to postdocs who have made a breakthrough discovery the skills to transform their findings into a viable business concept;
- To make our Institute more attractive career choices for new postdocs.

### **4.3 Background**

While more than 80% of postdocs aim at a tenured position in our institute (survey last retreat), at most 15% will acquire one. After two or three temporary successful contracts, most postdocs need to find an alternative. However, enthusiasm for a move outside our institute is low. Experienced postdocs may be unaware of their capacity to play pivotal roles in new start-ups in the biotech, pharmaceutical industries or governmental organizations. To achieve a successful move inside or outside academia, senior postdocs need to master transferable skills. These include communication, networking, team working, managing and motivating people, negotiating, management of time and resource, presenting orally in a clear and effective way, writing scientific material clearly and appropriately, personal effectiveness, writing concise e-mails, conducting meetings or making the most out of informal discussions at the coffee machine and delivering an elevator pitch.

Developing scientists are likely to be much more successful outside academia if they have business acumen and can adjust in a flexible way to a business culture. Success requires attention to details beyond the bench.

Dutch academia pays little attention to these transferable skills for postdocs. This is reflected by a 'Survey of Best Places for Postdocs to work', commissioned by the American journal 'The Scientist'. In an annual review international institutes were assessed on factors postdocs take into account when they choose a job. The most important criteria assessed are: quality of utilities, infrastructure, payment, training qualities, mentoring, communication, coaching in career development and networking. In general the Dutch universities and research institutes have not been reviewed particularly well with the exception of our Institute. We scored high on the ranking list (3500 respondents) of best postdoc places outside North America (third in 2005, eleventh in 2006). The retreats for postdocs organized by us certainly contributed to this success (see references below). The retreats have become more and more successful, and other institutes wanted to send their postdocs as well. At the last retreat, 150 postdocs from 7 institutes participated. The growing success, however, made it increasingly difficult to organize the retreat with volunteers only. Therefore, Peter Peters asked the help of Lilian Menu (employment and organization psychologist in the non-profit sector) to professionalize the organization and Postdoc Career Development Initiative (PCDI) was born. PCDI is very pleased that SoFoKleS, the Dutch social fund for science, subscribes PCDI's mission and recently announce that it is (in collaboration with the Dutch ministry of economic affairs) willing to support the start-up phase with 500.000 Euro. The next year will be used to set up the organization, and interest postdocs, research institutes, companies and the government to participate. A website is released <http://www.postdoc-development.eu>, and the eighth retreat will be organized from 16-18<sup>th</sup> of June 2010.

#### **4.4 NKI-AVL Postdoc Career Development in the news**

Nature 2005; 438: 126. Retreat to make progress by E. Beers, A. Klerkx and A. Thiele

Cell 2006; 125: 407-9. Learning to Lead by C. Aschwanden

Nature 2006; 445: 948. Torn between two ladders by A. Griekspoor

Cell 2006; 124: 445-7. Professionalizing the postdoctoral experience by C. Aschwanden