

Biotechnology boost for Alberta

New training centre opens doors for grad students

By Case van Wyngaarden

Ever consider what it takes to cure an infectious disease? To genetically enhance crop yields? Or how about what's involved in cleaning up the environment? Well...the first step is education.

To help provide this education, the U of C's Faculty of Medicine has built a new biotechnology training centre (CASE: where is it located? at the Health Sciences Centre?). The centre is dedicated to giving medical graduate students the broad-based instruction required for careers in the biotechnology industry.

The training centre will officially open in September with about 10 students beginning a one-year, course-based master's program in biomedical technology.

"The recent limitations to careers in academia has created an environment where students are actively taking advantage of industrial opportunities," says Dr. Pamela Sokol, a U of C medical professor and the new centre's coordinator. "The biotechnology centre is focused on providing hands on training for these demanding industrial careers."

Sokol says that graduate students are often caught in a dilemma of having a great deal of knowledge about a specific area, but lacking the broad knowledge base for solving the kinds of multidisciplinary problems that arise in the biotechnology industry. One of the new centre's goals is to provide this knowledge base.

Although Canada's biotechnology industry behind the United States, activity is picking up in Canada and a trained work force will be in high demand, says Sokol.

"With the production of a skilled biotech labor force, Calgary has the opportunity to attract a growth industry. This would undoubtedly lead to a significant economic benefit."

The program's initial focus will be in medical technology. However, as the program is established, interdisciplinary ties between other faculties such as science and engineering could be established and move the centre into new areas such as agriculture and environmental studies.

In addition to its primary role as a graduate teaching facility, the centre stands to improve the U of C's quality of research and improve graduate student researchers' access to equipment. The centre will also play a role in the education of senior undergraduate medical students, and provide workshops to high school groups and their teachers.

The U of C received a grant from the Alberta Science and Research Authority (ASRA) for the sum of \$493,000 to contribute to the construction and equipment purchase for the facility. The remaining capital was raised through the Partners of Health organization, the Faculty of Medicine, and a number of small contributions from private industries.

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