

## **New biotech cluster: MedCoast Scandinavia**

A new cross-border biotech cluster is emerging from the Oslo region in Norway and the Gothenberg region in Sweden. One of the aims of MedCoast is to provide links between the Norwegian public research fund, FUGE, and the Swedish fund, SWEGENE, as well as universities, research networks and industry in the region.

This region, which has three million inhabitants, covers about 25 science parks of various sizes, among them the Oslo Research Park and the Swedish Sahlgrenska Science Park. All of them have a close working relationship.

The MedCoast initiative is intended to strengthen biological research, fuel the exchange of ideas as well as scientists, and attract venture capital. According to the project manager, Kaare Norum, Norway has the same number of biotech companies per inhabitant as Denmark and Sweden, but they are generally very small and the project is meant to help them grow.

The aim is to eventually form a close relationship with Medicon Valley (*Scrip* No 2791, p 4-5), which covers Copenhagen and southern Sweden, in order to create a larger bio region, Ole Petter Ottesen, dean of science at the University of Oslo, told *Scrip*. "MedCoast is a geographical challenge to Medicon Valley, which we now consider our big brother. The idea is that we will use each other and together represent Scandinavia abroad," he said. It is already a partner of the ScanBalt project (see page x).

Among the region's strengths are neurological and marine biology, according to Mr Norum. There is a close relationship between the marine biology environments of Oslo, Göteborg, Lund and Copenhagen, and the coastal zones of Kattegat and Skagerrak. Norway also has an asset in its extensive patient health registers and biobanks.

The closest research institutions in MedCoast will be the University of Oslo and the University of Gothenburg, and all in all the region will cover some 100,000 students and 4,000 researchers. So far, 30 international master students have been enrolled in a bioinformatics programme this year.

The MedCoast initiative was inaugurated on April 9th, 2002, and the secretariat is now being set up, with its director Mr Norum running the show in the meantime. Funding applications have already been sent to the EC and the Nordic Industrial Fund. "We have had a very good response both from the public sector and from researchers," he said.

### **Potential patterns**

One problem may be that the Norwegian government is only investing 1.7% of its GDP in R&D, compared with Sweden's 4%, and far below the OECD average. Mr Norum says the industry also needs to increase its contribution. But he thinks the MedCoast initiative may help put a greater focus on research as the government has expressed interest in the project.

Also, Norway is not a traditional home for big pharmaceutical companies. But Mr Ottesen does not think this will cause problems \_ he noted that the US state of Massachusetts had a successful biotech cluster although it never hosted any big pharmaceutical companies.

SWEGENE (SKr100 million (\$11 million) per year over a five-year period) is a co-operation between the universities of Lund and Gothenburg and the Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg to establish an international frontline position for biomedicine and bioscience. It is funded by the Wallenberg Foundation \_ the Wallenberg family are major contributors in AstraZeneca. FUGE (NKr150 million (\$20 million) for 2003) is a Norwegian public research plan for functional genomics.

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