Alan Palmer: Making neuroscience count

BNA Non-Executive Director

Alan Palmer retains a lifelong fascination with neuroscience – and a desire to see the fruits of research benefit patients.

Alan Palmer has had remarkable success in launching a string of biotech firms, all in the neuroscience arena. Yet, despite an early fascination with the brain, he initially studied biochemistry at Warwick – “There were no degrees in neuroscience at the time – they just didn’t exist.”

After an MSc in neurochemistry at the Institute of Psychiatry, he began to look for a suitable PhD topic and supervisor: “I didn’t know much about biotech at the time.” Professor Palmer recalls, “so I thought I’d be better off joining a pharmaceutical company first.”

He ended up joining Wyeth in 1994, working on CNS drug discovery. Within a year, however, Wyeth changed direction, ending its UK CNS work. Professor Palmer was one of 20 employees offered positions in the USA: “I decided to stay, and with Chris Evans and four people from Wyeth we formed the UK’s first neuroscience start up company, Cerebus.”

Cerbus went on to secure £27m in funding, growing rapidly to employ 100 or so people. In 1999, it merged with Vanguard Medica, forming Vernalis – a company listed on the London Stock Exchange.

As well as Cerebus, Professor Palmer has helped to establish a host of other companies, including Cerelexus with researchers from the Wolfson Institute for Biomedical Research at UCL and Pharmidex, a contract research company specialising in drug metabolism and pharmacokinetics, with particular expertise on the blood-brain barrier. In 2008, he co-founded MS Therapeutics, which is developing treatments for multiple sclerosis. He has also set up a consulting business, Cerebroscience, specialising in translational neuroscience.

Alongside this commercial work, which earned him the title of 2005 London Biotech Entrepreneur of the Year, he is also helping to develop the entrepreneurial skills of students at Bristol, where he is life science entrepreneur in residence. He is also a visiting professor at UCL and Reading, and sits on the board of Nucleus, a not-for-profit membership organisation supporting life sciences and healthcare companies in the UK.

Does he think scientists can succeed in business? “Yes, I believe that science provides an excellent foundation for a life in business. In science you need to be able to look at data in minute detail but also be able to pull back and look at the bigger picture. Integrating lots of diverse information. That’s a very useful skill to have in business.”

While acknowledging that the retreat of big companies from neuroscience has been a setback, he suggests that there have been a number of positive changes as research charities have become more involved in drug discovery and more public money has flowed towards translational studies.

He remains enthusiastic about new opportunities, recently helping to establish a new company, Cerestim, associated with Imperial College, which is developing a therapy based on transcranial brain stimulation technology, initially for treatment-resistant depression.

His commercial experience has brought a more business-like rigour to the BNA. “I would like to work with adolescents to facilitate their ability to have an impact on research question formation and the interpretation of results.”

Q: What are your long-term plans?
A/ My long-term plan is to head a laboratory that collaborates with adolescents to let them steer the research. Adults conduct most research concerning adolescent development, but I’d like to work with adolescents to facilitate their ability to have an impact on research.

Q: What do you enjoy doing outside science and medicine?
A/ Outside of science I enjoy spending time with my partner Joe and our daughter Celilo (who was born a few months after I defended my thesis). We love to travel, and have already taken Celilo to four different countries, as well as on many road trips to experience the beautiful landscapes of Oregon.