

Professor Mitradas M Panicker retires

Professor Mitradas M Panicker's name suggests associations across the breadth of the country. Professor Panicker is a Mumbaikar, having spent his early years in what was then Bombay. On joining NCBS in the early 90's, he was referred to as Mitra or Das, besides the more common Panic.

These associations with the coasts notwithstanding, his working life has been spent in the landlocked city of BungleUru. Clearly a difficult person to place in a cubby hole, he has a BSc and an MSc (sort of) in Chemistry, a PhD working on bacterial genetics, and then a career chasing neurotransmitter receptors. Initially the fast acting variety of ionotropic glutamate receptors, and then the slower metabotropic serotonin receptors. And thus to serotonin itself, which now appears to be involved in everything from determining the state of stem cells, to sleep (perchance to dream), and everything in between.



Panicker was one of the first few scientists to join NCBS and arrived with a million ideas on just about everything, especially techniques. He very soon became the go-to guy for any molecular biology issues, set up the first oligonucleotide synthesiser in NCBS and then the first DNA sequencer as well, and ran both for a while. He soon became the resident shrink and spent the evenings counselling students on matters ranging from the stomach to the heart and probably everything else. Very much the Friend, Philosopher and Guide for the early batches of NCBS students. So much so that he was generally acknowledged to be the *de facto* Director of NCBS from sun down to sun up.



Professor Panicker's exploration of everything new has done much to demonstrate to the world at large that the most advanced technologies could be successfully implemented here. This contributed to establishing a reputation of NCBS being at the forefront of research in modern biology. Well before stem cell research became a bandwagon, he collaborated with an IVF clinic in Bombay to develop four human embryonic stem cell lines. This was in 2001, and was internationally recognised - in fact, these were among a very limited number of lines generated anywhere in the world to be approved by the US government for stem cell research. As one of India's leading stem cell-ologists, he co-wrote and submitted, in 2006, the grant proposal that resulted in inStem. Still on the stem cell theme, he worked with clinicians and scientists from NIMHANS on establishing iPSC lines from Alzheimer's patients. This work then led to the establishment of a major centre based in NIMHANS and NCBS for creating a registry of iPSC lines derived from patients suffering from various neurodegenerative diseases and their families. It is typical of the person that his contributions are not trumpeted and, in all probability, are not even suspected by most on campus.



His 2004 patent application for a novel assay to screen for antipsychotic drugs was among the first by an NCBS researcher. The US patent was awarded in 2009. The patent made waves and a company stationed equipment in his lab and funded research to develop the assay further. His human stem cell work was also attractive to industry with Cardion entering into a collaborative research agreement in 2001, the first such agreement in NCBS. Having been bitten by the bug, he has continued patenting and has two applications in the works at present. He is also threatening to set up a slew of companies (well, at least one) to take these projects forward. Professor Panicker is a recently married retiree (Mrs. Panicker is a former student of NCBS, and will soon be his new boss). He plans to go back to the bench (in California), and run companies (in India), while bouncing babies on his knee. Not an easy proposition, but we would not bet against the dashing Professor Panicker pulling it off.

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