

Swiss open new biotech hub

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Swiss firms are joining forces to bring the latest biotech findings to the market (The Genetics Company)

A major new centre for the Swiss biotechnology industry has opened in the Zurich area.

The Biotech Centre, located in Schlieren, has led to the creation of more than 250 highly skilled jobs.

The four companies, which jointly opened the centre, are spin-offs from either Zurich's Federal Institute of Technology or Zurich University.

"The inauguration of this biotech centre provides a welcome relief from the prevailing economic gloom," said the Swiss economics minister, Pascal Couchepin.

Science and business

He added that the four companies, ESBAtch, Prionics, Cytos Biotechnology and The Genetics Company were "the perfect illustration of the bridge spanning science, technology and innovation".

"They are a bridge between pure science and pure business," said Couchepin.

Prionics, which focuses on neurological diseases and has become internationally recognised for its work on prion diseases and BSE testing, won the Swiss Economic Award in June.

Cytos is trying to discover new products to prevent and cure chronic diseases, which are characterised by a slow decay of vital body functions. It began public trading on the Swiss stock exchange on Tuesday.

The Genetics Company and ESBAtch are both innovative drug discovery companies.

Creating wealth

"Science, technology and innovation are the real driving forces behind our modern economies," Couchepin told swissinfo.

"Open economies depend to a large extent on the translation of scientific discoveries into viable commercial propositions. This is what ultimately determines the pace of economic and social change. And that in turn is what creates wealth.

"Switzerland is all the more dependent on this kind of virtuous circle since it has no natural resources."

It is hoped that the new centre will help transform basic research at Zurich University and the Federal Institute of Technology into commercialised biotechnological products.

The cluster of experience and expertise is expected to attract new companies to the area at a time when Swiss-based pharmaceutical companies are looking outside the country to establish new research centres.

Switzerland's other biotech hubs are in the regions around Basel and Lake

Geneva.

International reputation

Couchepin said the fact that Professor Kurt Wüthrich was awarded this year's Nobel prize for chemistry was proof of the excellent international reputation of Zurich's Federal Institute of Technology.

But he said Switzerland could not rest on its laurels. "This year's Nobel prize was awarded for past achievements," he added. "We have to continue working hard on the fundamentals to make sure we still have a leading position ten years from now."

Switzerland has over a hundred biotech firms – despite the industry being barely ten years old.

The country is ranked sixth in Europe in terms of number of firms but fourth as regards numbers of products in the pipeline.

"The potential of biotechnology is huge," said Couchepin. "The only question is the pace at which expectations and hopes can be realised. The economic cycle will affect the pace of future development but not its general direction.

"Biotech discoveries have to gain social acceptance. A delicate balance has to be found between technological development and the ability of people's minds to absorb the implications of change."

Other leading figures from science, business and politics, shared their views on the future of the biotechnology industry and medicine at a symposium held at the new centre.

swissinfo, Vincent Landon

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Related Sites

Prionics: <http://www.prionics.ch>

ESBAtech: <http://www.esbatech.com>

The Genetics Company: <http://www.the-genetics.com>

Cytos: <http://www.cytos.com>