

An eventful start-up phase for the Botnar Research Centre for Child Health

Basel, Sept 19th 2019. Exactly one year ago, the Fondation Botnar, the University of Basel and ETH Zurich signed the contract to found the Botnar Research Centre for Child Health (BRCCH). The work of the Centre commenced on January 1st, 2019. One year after the signing ceremony, the BRCCH take the opportunity to shed light on this ongoing start-up phase and look forward to the next steps of the Centre.

A Brief Look Back

The concept for the Botnar Research Centre for Child Health (BRCCH) originated in February 2017 from an inspirational idea by the Fondation Botnar's board to create «something truly impactful in child health», as Peter Lenz (former Head of the Board of Fondation Botnar) recalls. This new initiative would build on the scientific expertise of the University of Basel and the ETH Zurich and benefit the health and wellbeing of children and adolescents worldwide.

Under the first working title «platform for artificial intelligence for children», a detailed blueprint for a new and ambitious research Centre had been formulated within a year, drawing on the exceptional and complementary know-how in medicine, life sciences, public health and social sciences available at the four partner institutions, the University of Basel, ETH Zurich, the University Children's Hospital of Basel and the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute. The BRCCH was approved by the board of the Fondation Botnar as a Centre with a wide-reaching remit to translate basic research to clinical practice.



Botnar Research
Centre for
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The founding documents were signed on September 19th 2018 by Peter Lenz, representing the Fondation Botnar, Andrea Schenker-Wicki, the president of the University of Basel, and Lino Guzzella, the president of ETH Zurich. So it came that the BRCCH is funded by a CHF 100 Million contribution from Fondation Botnar for ten years, divided between the University of Basel and the ETH Zurich.

Starting in January 2019, the first months of the Centre had been marked by the set-up of a physical office location, the hiring of a management team and the charms of unchartered grounds involved in setting up a new research Centre. In parallel, efforts were undertaken to focus and condense the Centre's strategy in dialogue with stakeholders. The Centre is run by the Directors Georg Holländer and Sai Reddy. To assist and supervise their tasks, a unique governance has been created for the Centre: In the BRCCH Board, all main partners of the Centre are represented whereas the Strategic-Scientific Advisory Board brings together national and international leaders with expertise in the domains that constitute BRCCH's focal areas. Moreover, the BRCCH is supported by a group of independent and international experts in the Project Evaluation Board.

Gaining new knowledge in child health

Since its inception, the BRCCH has created a highly attractive initiative to establish transdisciplinary research programs where consortia of scientists from its partner institutions combine their expertise to address essential challenges in paediatric and adolescent health. With generously funded projects for an initial phase of 5 years, the supported research is not only expected to provide new understanding of specific diseases in childhood and adolescence but also envisioned to develop novel strategies for their precise diagnosis and effective treatment.

The prospect of successful translation of these research projects to clinical practice in low and middle-income countries constitutes another central feature of the research programs supported by BRCCH. A first call for these «Multi-Investigator Projects» (MIP) has been launched in June. To a resounding interest of the scientific community at the participating partner institutions, a large number of

grant proposals have been submitted for funding. These are currently subject to a comprehensive, three-stage review by international experts.

In October, short-listed MIP applications will be presented in a workshop to a panel of independent experts which will discuss, in detail, the scientific merits, strengths and opportunities of each of the projects. Following this workshop, the expert panel will make final recommendations to the BRCCH Board for funding. Successful project applicants will be able to start their research in 2020.

Exciting Prospects

Two additional schemes to support research in child and adolescent health will be launched in the course of 2020: Firstly, we aim to promote a call for fellowships, which will support young researchers in fields that are of relevance for the remit of the BRCCH. This fellowship program is specifically designed to provide unique opportunities to early stage scientists from BRCCH's four partner institutions to transition initial concepts into mature projects that will be able to receive significant backing from BRCCH or other funders in the future. And secondly, we will identify research fields that will enrich the Basel and Zurich life sciences hubs by creating new professorial posts. The research domains of these posts will be in areas that are complementary to the partner institutions' strengths and opportunities and that will directly relate to the the Centre's objective.

Taken together, these initiatives are intended to create an outstanding core of basic, translational and clinical expertise that align with BRCCH's overall mission to provide novel paths and sustainable solutions for unmet challenges in child and adolescent health. Thus, the BRCCH will create a vibrant community of scientists with the explicit goal to improve the health of society's future: our children and adolescents. **Exciting times are truly ahead!**