Europe's brain drain

THE IRRESISTIBILITY OF US UNIVERSITIES

Biotechnologist Dr Jens Meiler explains his reasons for emigration to America

By Meike Lerner

USA, although I always intended to return home after a few years. However, during my interviews for assistant professorships, two of which took place in the US, I realised that the differences between the two countries are so enormous that, from a career point of view, it was going to be impossible to return to Germany,' he explained. Job insecurity in his homeland was one of the deciding factors: 'When you take a job there, you already know that the contract will end in five years and that you will have to start looking elsewhere. There is a danger that somewhere between the ages of 35 and 40 your career gets stuck. In particular since we are so specialised that it's becoming increasingly difficult to find the right job at the right time in your career, and when the right job becomes available you compete with applicants returning from the US - who are often better qualified because they have been able to carry out better research using their larger "start-up packages", in laboratories with better facilities and in the security of a tenure-track position.'

In the USA, assistant professor posts are designed to lead to a full professorship. Continued employment as a professor in the US is only performance-related, so to some extent you have a better control of your own destiny,' he added.

The financial situation for starting scientists is also more favourable which facilitate research at a higher level. 'When compared to Germany a larger part of the US research funds goes directly and competitively to the researchers, less goes to the University administration. This gives young scientists higher chances to receive independent funding. It also prompts American universities to provide their assistant professors with substantial start-up finances to make them competitive. In turn American universities profit directly when their young investigators are successful, since they receive a bonus for every dollar I receive from a research foundation.'

Dr Meiler pointed out. However, although US universities also pay higher salaries, he said this was not a crucial factor in his decision to remain in the US.

Aged 33 and married, with a young son, he sees his mid-term future in the US: 'If an institute in Germany was to lure me away, I would return, but these job offers are rare - there are maybe only a dozen full professorships in Germany that match my research profile. It's important that a job description fits 100%. That's why I am using all my opportunities here; after all, I have only just started my research projects and built up my staff. Our research into the computer-assisted determination of protein structures is only in at an early stage, but it's very promising and carries considerable potential. This is the challenge that I'm focusing on at the moment.'