



5. The Dual Role of Academic Biobanks

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Academic biobanks have a dual role: they need to support two actors in a production that leads to new drugs and diagnostics with resulting advances in patient care. The two actors they need to support are (1) researchers in academia and (2) researchers in industry. It is only by the efforts of both these actors that discoveries in academia can be translated into drug and diagnostic products that have been validated and approved for patient care.

Many people would agree that academic biobanks have a moral responsibility to provide biosamples to researchers in industry. Academic biobanks are in the public sector, they receive public funding and industry researchers need their support to develop new drug and diagnostic products which are for the public good.

It is not all about moral responsibilities though: there are potential benefits that come from supporting industry research. Indeed, cooperation with industry is one of the few means, perhaps the only means, by which academic biobanks can achieve financial sustainability. There are various ways in which biobank support for industry research will result in financial support for biobanks from industry. There is no question that biobanks need this financial support. Experience over the past 20 years has shown us this.

Furthermore, cooperation with industry in the form of research collaborations can be highly beneficial in terms of synergy and in terms of transfer of skills and expertise between

academia and industry. Not only from academia to industry, but also from industry to academia.

With all these reasons to be motivated, it might seem as if teamwork between biobanks, academia and industry would be the natural consequence. As if everything should just fall into place and run smoothly and efficiently.

Unfortunately however, things are not so simple: there are 'multiple factors' that inhibit academic biobanks from supplying biosamples to researchers in industry. As a result there are negative consequences:

- Industry researchers are deprived of valuable research material.
- Academic biobanks are deprived of industry funding.
- Underfunding of academic biobanks reduces their ability to serve both academia and industry.

So what are these 'multiple factors' that inhibit academic biobanks from supplying biosamples to researchers in industry? Some of them are practical issues like the need for academic biobanks to collect the kind of samples needed by industry. Some of them are cultural issues, like the different mind-sets of industry and academia, or like our attitudes to commercialisation. Some, it has to be said, are sensitive issues that are not easy to discuss.

What is at stake here is the ability of academic biobanks to perform their essential dual role. So the 'multiple factors', both practical and cultural, need to be examined in 'broad daylight', so that we can collectively decide how to minimise their inhibitory effect. Future articles in this series will address this subject and attempt to encourage discussion.

Disclaimer: the author of this article works independently and any views expressed are his own.

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