



Richard Cowburn

Responsible Corporate Partnering,  
Head of External Engagement Office

Karolinska Institutet

## Jumping ship creates more opportunities

Sometimes, leaving a job is a planned, proactive decision. But for Richard Cowburn, the decision lay beneath the surface for a long time before seeming to burst forth spontaneously.

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After 17 years with his own Alzheimer’s disease research lab at Karolinska Institutet (KI), one of the world’s foremost medical universities, Cowburn took the plunge. He left KI to help develop AstraZeneca’s strategy for Alzheimer’s disease and build early research programs.

One reason Cowburn became disenchanted with his role at KI was the gap between his aspirations for research and his desire to influence its translation into tangible solutions. “You come to some stage where you realize you create knowledge and contribute to a knowledge base, but you have little true insight as to how that knowledge gets used and implemented to create something concrete.”

Nevertheless, Cowburn did hesitate the first two or three times that AstraZeneca asked him to make a jump to industry. He liked his academic freedom, but he also felt that he had achieved a lot of what he wanted to complete as an academic. He enjoyed mentoring students and graduate students, but the idea of moving to industry to gain in-depth knowledge about the drug discovery process held great appeal. When Cowburn was finally asked by AstraZeneca to refer an academic who would move to the company to develop their strategy for Alzheimer’s disease, his spontaneous response was, “You’re speaking to that person.”

“It was the best proactive decision I’ve made in my career,” says Cowburn. “If I wanted to create more opportunities for myself and understand what I’d been doing all those years, then the only way I could do that would be by jumping ship.”

When Cowburn moved to AstraZeneca, he brought in-depth knowledge of Alzheimer’s disease mechanisms. He maintained an adjunct professorship at KI and he well understood where the field was going, where the “hot” science was, and who the key players were.

At AstraZeneca, Cowburn gained valuable knowledge and skills around structuring a drug discovery and development process and criteria for starting and progressing projects. In retrospect, Cowburn says that “it was a huge challenge to understand drug discovery, and even after six years, I didn’t really understand it completely or know if anybody really does.”

Cowburn found the work culture at AstraZeneca to be stimulating, particularly the range of bright people he encountered working in a multi-discipline, team-based environment. He grew to like industry’s milestone-focused structure, some of which applies now in academia. He gained valuable project management and line manager skills that could be applied in any setting. “It put me in good stead for being able to pursue a career in any branch.”

Cowburn also appreciated the decision-making process at AstraZeneca. In academia, he notes, “it can sometimes be very unclear how decisions are made and why, which is quite different from industry.”

In 2012, AstraZeneca ended all its R&D activities in neuroscience. “There was still an awful lot that I could have

learned,” says Cowburn. “I would have appreciated a few more years of working in industry.”

Cowburn wanted his next job to also be in Sweden’s life sciences ecosystem. He landed back at KI, leading corporate partnering efforts as a non-faculty member of the central administration.

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The decision to return to KI was straightforward: The day after he learned AstraZeneca was closing down its Alzheimer’s research, he looked on the KI home page and found a job announcement for the position he now holds. The work is similar to what he was doing at AstraZeneca, except that he is no longer an active researcher.


Cowburn’s prior work with drug discovery at AstraZeneca bolsters his current conversations with KI academics. “I can ask them the relevant questions and help them build that understanding so that when they start interacting with industry, they understand where industry is coming from, and the kind of questions industry will be asking them,” he says. “And that creates understanding to bridge between what the academics want, where they think they’re going with their research, their understanding of what the industry is looking for, and the criteria they apply to bring a program on board. That is a knowledge set that I would not have gained just by staying in academia.”

Cowburn misses the annual bonus he got at AstraZeneca. He also notes that the pension schemes in industry are better. But he explains that in Sweden, at his level, the wages for working in industry and academia are not “astronomically” different. Also, job security in Sweden’s public sector is “not to be sniffed at.”

### Cowburn encourages young scientists to

- **Develop a diverse skill set.** “A lot of young people in academia get caught up in being too focused, thinking this is the way academic pathways go.”
- **Move among life science’s different components.** “Whether it be between classic life science and IT or engineering branches, think much more broadly about what you could potentially do,” advises Cowburn.
- **Consider timing.** Cowburn cautions against leaving academia too soon. Junior-level positions offer limited chances to advance, while more significant career development opportunities go to those who arrived as established scientists. “I saw many people in industry who were frustrated about not being able to climb the career ladder within the company,” he says.

Cowburn’s ultimate advice for those who might want to move between academia and industry is first to understand their career motivation. Then, create the work and skills that match such motivation. Cowburn’s motivation was to understand the relevance of academic research, and each career move brought him closer to this objective. Thus, he has come full circle since his initial time at KI and can now help KI faculty understand their work’s relevance. He regards integrating his experience as the key benefit of having returned to KI.

“Translating my own experience in a way that makes sense for the university and our researchers is the most rewarding thing,” says Cowburn. 



The Stefan Zimmerman Biomedicum on the KI campus symbolizes the bridge between the university and hospital and the combined efforts to create implementable health care solutions.