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Firm's boost for medical research

MEDICAL research has been given a boost by Billingham-based Cambridge Research Biochemicals (CRB).

The company, which produces synthetic peptides – essentially, fragments of proteins – leapt ahead of rivals in April by installing one of the world's most advanced peptide synthesisers, and the only one of its kind in Europe.

Understanding proteins – how they work, how they help the body fight disease and infection – is the key to drug discovery and development, and improving health care provision. But relying on naturally occurring proteins can both delay, and increase the costs of, vital medical research. Hence, manufacturing peptides 'to order' by chemical synthesis, and generating their antibody, is a cost-effective and quicker way for scientists to work.

CRB, the world's second-oldest peptide company, has customers that include the top ten giants of the international pharmaceutical world as well as world-renowned research institutes.

But being able to deliver a high

level of service requires constant innovation, according to CRB's commercial director Emily Humphrys who, with business partner Alison White, acquired the company in a management buy-out in 2000.

"There's no option to sit still in business – not for a British business competing globally," she said. "We have to be one step ahead in our marketing and technical advantage. Alison and I believe strongly in delivering the best possible service to our customers, and that means being prepared to invest. It also means being prepared to be highly flexible so customers get a tailor-made service."

Another key part of CRB's forward-thinking approach is its strategic alliance with academic bodies, in particular the University of Durham. In a joint exercise with the University's School of Biological and Biomedical Science and Department of Chemistry, it is investigating proteins which play a key role in heart disease, cancer and allergies. The 12-month project, funded by the EPSRC (Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council), is

focusing on a protein that plays a major role in atherosclerosis, known as 'furring of the arteries', which can lead to heart disease.

"Working with universities is increasingly important to us as we get more complex requests for peptides," says Humphrys. "Durham University brings us enormous specialist knowledge, allowing us to develop a greater understanding of the subject."

Dr Ehmke Pohl, structural biologist at the University and one of the project's main researchers, added: "Working with CRB not only gives us the opportunity to develop a better understanding of the commercial needs of industry but allows us to acquire invaluable knowledge and skills."

CRB's specialist ability is not only recognised by British academic departments. In 2009, it was invited to become a partner in the European Union's five-year BIOSCENT project, a €6m pan-European programme of innovative research and development into biodegradable heart patches. Involving some of Europe's leading research institutes, CRB's contribution is to design and



AT THE HELM Emily Humphrys and Alison White of CRB

produce peptides for 'scaffolds' to promote heart function recovery.

Part of the secret of its success is both Emily Humphrys and Alison White are scientists with commercial backgrounds.

"We started out in a blue-chip organisation – ICI, as it was known – where we learned business and marketing skills," said Alison. "CRB was spun out as an established business from the organisation, so we haven't had to endure the early growing pains of an academic spin-out."

ICI had bought the original

Cambridge-based peptide business, set up in 1980 by scientists from the Medical Research Council, in 1989.

After the management buy-out in 2000, the business moved to Belasis Hall Technology Park in Billingham where Humphrys and White have invested nearly £500,000, with grants from regional development agency One NorthEast, to give CRB one of the UK's most advanced peptide synthesis operations. Last year, the business won the award for Outstanding Growth in the North East's HealthConnect's Business for Life Awards.

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