

My JSPS-sponsored visit to Japan, 26th October-15th November 2013

How do glial cells contribute to neural development and plasticity?

My Invitation Fellowship grew out of a pre-existing link between myself and my host in Japan, Prof Koujiro Tohyama (Iwate Medical University, IMU). Our acquaintance started at UCL, with which Prof Tohyama has had a long-term association stemming from his time spent there as a postdoctoral Fellow in the '80s. Through friendship and discussion we discovered shared scientific interests that led, ultimately, to collaborative research and a co-authored publication.

The main purpose of my visit to Japan was to cement the relationship between our two labs and to plan the next steps of our collaboration. I spent a week at Iwate Medical University, Morioka (about 2.5 hours North of Tokyo by Shinkansen), where I was provided with a desk and spent part of my day keeping up with the inescapable business of my "day job" in the UK, part of the day discussing science with Faculty members and their students. I also gave a research talk there. Evenings were spent with my host and his colleagues at his home, or sampling the local cuisine in Morioka.

I happened to have been in Morioka visiting Prof Tohyama on March 11th 2011, a date that is emblazoned in my mind and the Japanese psyche for the enormity of that day's events. During my recent JSPS visit Prof Tohyama accompanied me to the township of Miyako and other parts of the East coast to see for myself some of the consequences of the 2011 tsunami, as well as the natural beauty of the area. It is remarkable how the environment has been cleared up and the affected communities seem to be recovering their sense of place and purpose, despite the lingering sense of devastation. My admiration goes out to the strength and resilience of the inhabitants of that part of Japan.

After arriving in Japan and before travelling to Morioka, I spent a few days in Kyoto accompanied by my wife on her first trip to Japan. We were able to enjoy the traditional architecture, culture and cuisine of Kyoto, and to linger in the serenity of the temples and their gardens. While there I visited Kyoto Prefectural University of Medicine and gave a research talk. Later in the trip I visited and talked at Niigata University School of Medicine, and RIKEN Brain Science Institute on the outskirts of Tokyo. In each place that I visited I was able to combine scientific discourse with some cultural experience, so that by the end of my trip I was beginning to get a feel for the Japanese way of life, in the provincial centres as well as the Tokyo-Kyoto axis. When I boarded the plane at Narita it was with sadness at leaving behind a once-in-a-lifetime experience, while looking forward to the next wave of experiments with my collaborator and host, Prof Tohyama.

Tips for the scientific visitor in Japan? Buy a Japan Rail pass before you leave home - train-travel is a joy. Stay in a traditional hotel (ryoken). Visit the "onsen" (hot springs) and join the Japanese in relaxation mode (read up on the etiquette of bathing first!).

William D Richardson
Professor of Biology and Director,
Wolfson Institute for Biomedical Research
University College London
w.richardson@ucl.ac.uk