

Andreas Meyer-Lindenberg, director, Central Institute of Mental Health, Mannheim, Germany

Neuroscientist leaves NIH to head back to native Germany

Andreas Meyer-Lindenberg owes his interest in neuroscience to his psychiatrist father. And now his work could help revolutionize his father's field by offering better options for diagnosis and treatment of mental illness. (See CV)

At the medical school of the University of Bonn in Germany, Meyer-Lindenberg initially focused on neurochemistry: he did a thesis on receptor mechanisms associated with risk of suicide. Then switched gears to investigate mental illness by understanding how the brain is wired. After a neurology residency, he moved to the Justus-Liebig University hospital in Giessen to conduct neuroimaging research. This "failed miserably", he says, in part because the technology was relatively new and no local partners were interested in applying it to brain study.

Meyer-Lindenberg chose to pursue a postdoc in the United States at the National Institute of Mental Health. Intending to stay for two years to learn neuroimaging methods, he has stayed for ten: in recent years, for example, he has investigated the interaction of the prefrontal cortex and striatum in people with schizophrenia. He also studied mathematical models, earning a master's degree in mathematics from the University of Hagen in Germany. "I was hoping to get a broader tool belt to look at these things," he says.

His mathematical skills have helped him develop methods to investigate complex interactions between genetic variants and their influence on the human brain. He now combines studies of genetic indicators of mental illness with neuroimaging. The approach helps uncover the elusive biological mechanisms of mental disorders, he says.

Starting on 1 July he plans to further that aim in his new role as director of Germany's Central Institute of Mental Health. His predecessor, Fritz Henn, has no doubt he will succeed. "Andreas is the brightest young guy in the field," Henn says, adding that Meyer-Lindenberg pioneered the marriage of genetics and imaging in neurobiological research. Henn has spent the past five years trying to recruit Meyer-Lindenberg — all the while helping the institute excel in biological psychiatry and making it proficient in both genetics and imaging.

His tactic worked. Meyer-Lindenberg says that the institute's top-notch facilities and departments will allow his group to work towards a new level of therapeutic application. His long-term goal, he adds, is to overhaul how mental illness is categorized and treated.

CV

2005–07: Chief, Unit for Systems Neuroscience in Psychiatry, National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), Bethesda, Maryland

2004–07: Co-director, Neuroimaging Facility, NIMH

2001–05: Staff clinician, Clinical Brain Disorders Branch (CBDB), NIMH

1997–2001: Visiting associate researcher fellow, CBDB

