

FEATURE

Olga Sosnovtseva and Erik Mosekilde Discuss the BioSim Network of Excellence

Olga Sosnovtseva and Erik Mosekilde have collaborated for more than a decade in the areas of biological physics and modeling of complex dynamical phenomena in living systems. During the spring of 2004 they formulated the application to the European Biotechnology for Health Programme that led to the establishment of BioSim, an unusually successful Network of Excellence in “Biosimulation – A New Tool in Drug Development”, described in detail at <http://biosim.fysik.dtu.dk:8080/biosim/index.jsp>.



Erik Mosekilde is a professor of physics at The Technical University of Denmark (DTU), where he teaches courses in complex systems theory and modeling of biological systems. In 1977, he defended his second doctor's degree in theoretical and experimental physics, but at that time he had already become interested in modeling the dynamics of economic and biological systems. The challenge was to try to establish mechanism-based models of systems that had not previously been submitted to this approach. His education in electrical engineering and physics provided a powerful background for understanding the dynamics of biological feedback networks, and his early research on acoustoelectric phenomena in piezoelectric semiconductors had given him experience with instabilities and nonlinear dynamic phenomena under far-from-equilibrium conditions. His initial work on respiratory control during exercise led to studies of the absorption of insulin from the skin, the mechanisms behind the pulsatile release of insulin, nephron pressure and flow

regulation, bone remodeling, and cellular communication.

Olga Sosnovtseva is a lecturer with the Department of Physics at DTU and holds a prestigious Skou Stipend, named after the Danish physiologist Jens Christian Skou, who was recently awarded the Nobel Prize for his discovery of the Na/K pump. Olga Sosnovtseva graduated from Saratov State University in the field of Nonlinear Dynamics. Her interests in biological physics developed through collaboration with experimental groups in Copenhagen, Marburg and Moscow. She has worked on dynamical properties of kidney pressure and flow autoregulation, on multiscale cellular interactions including neuron-glia networks and smooth muscle cells, and on application of the novel experimental technique of interference microscopy, combined with double-wavelet analysis, to study intra- and inter-cellular processes.

Sosnovtseva and Mosekilde talked with THE BIOLOGICAL PHYSICIST about the origins and goals of the BioSim project.

Why did you feel there was a need for a new approach to drug development?

The pharmaceutical industry is generally considered as one of the best performing industries in Europe. However, during the last decade it has become clear that the industry faces a number of serious problems, and that a new approach to the drug development process must be found. While R&D investments have continued to rise at a significant rate, the number of major new drugs has stagnated, or even declined. Due to the enormous costs and the long lead times in conjunction with the relatively high probability that a drug will fail in the final trial, the economic risks have risen to an unacceptable level.

Was it difficult to find funding?

Through discussions with the European Federation for Pharmaceutical Scientists (EUFEPS), the European Medicines Agency (EMA), and other organizations, the European Commission was fully aware of the above problems, and BioSim was established on December 1, 2004 in response to a direct call from the Commission. The total budget is 10.7 million Euro over a period of 5 years. This budget primarily covers training of young scientists, exchange of students and staff, development of collaborative projects, common conferences and workshops, spreading of excellence, and communication with the public. Most of the research performed by the BioSim groups must be funded by other agencies. However, many of the groups also have significant funding from national research councils.

What is the purpose of BioSim?

The primary purpose of the Network is to establish a strong and lasting collaboration among some of Europe's leading research groups in systems biology. More specifically, the aim is to demonstrate that application of mechanism-based modeling represents an effective way to interpret the data obtained in the industry's clinical and pre-clinical trials. As the models are gradually developed and improved, this will allow the industry to reduce the number of trials and obtain an earlier warning of possible failure. By mechanism-based modeling we understand a modeling approach where the actual physical, chemical and biological processes of relevance to a given phenomenon are represented in as much detail as necessary. This approach underlies most research in physics. The challenge is, of course, to show that it can also be brought to work with the extreme complication that we find in biological systems.

How many scientists are involved in BioSim?

The BioSim Network involves 26 academic, 10 industrial, and 4 regulatory partners, or a total of nearly 200 scientists and PhD-students from 10 different countries.

The regulatory partners play an important role, because they define the criteria for acceptance of a new drug. If models have to be used as part of the

documentation for efficacy and lack of adverse side effects, then the regulatory agencies must be able to evaluate these models. 9 of the industrial partners are small and medium-sized enterprises, and Novo Nordisk is the only large industrial partner. However, most of the academic and SME partners maintain close collaborations with one or more large pharmaceutical companies. The academic partners cover a wide range of different biological and pharmaceutical specialties as well as physics, mathematics and complex systems theory.



Olga Sosnovtseva

What are the main scientific results produced from the BioSim Network so far?

BioSim's research is organized in six activity areas: diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, cancer, mental disorders, methodological developments, and communication with public. Within each of the first four areas, research is performed at many different biological levels, from the genetic and molecular level over biochemistry, cell biology and cell-to-cell communication to the function of organs, hormonal control and disease modeling. Some BioSim partners are also involved in

experimental treatments of patients with cancer, Parkinson's disease, or depression.

BioSim partners publish 50-60 papers a year in major international journals. Besides a recent special issue of *Journal of Biological Physics*, BioSim has also edited a book on "*Biosimulation in Drug Development*" (Wiley-VCH, Berlin, 2007).

Among the most significant results obtained so far are major improvements in the chronotherapy of certain forms of cancer and in deep-brain stimulation of patients with Parkinsonian and other forms of tremor. By analysing the synchronization phenomena in models of many globally coupled phase oscillators, the group in Jülich has been able to define a stimulation signal that can be used in a demand-controlled mode and at the same time is 10 times lower in amplitude than the standard signal. Preliminary results seem to indicate that, rather than gradually destroying brain tissue near the stimulation site, the improved approach may to some extent allow the brain cells to recover.

In collaboration with biophysicists from Moscow University, the BioSim group at the Department of Physics at DTU has studied interactions and mutual modulation between different intracellular processes by means of the newly developed phase modulated laser interference microscope. This equipment allows noninvasive studies of simultaneous intracellular processes over the frequency range from 0.2 to 20 Hz. In a fully developed version the equipment will make it possible to study automatically intracellular reactions to different drugs.

Would it be helpful for such a network to be established in the US as well?

The challenges that a mechanism-based description of the development and function of living organisms represents to science are the same in the US as in Europe, and so are the problems faced by the pharmaceutical industry. In a recent report, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) concluded that a major change in the current drug development process is required, particularly an improvement in the way information is obtained and exploited. At the same time, the American side may be inspired by the significant resources that the EU Commission has set aside for the

Innovative Medicines Initiative in the 7th Framework Programme.

BioSim already collaborates with the Canadian network for Applied Mathematics (MITACS) and, within the rules defined by the EU Commission, we are obviously interested in collaboration with networks in biological physics or systems biology in the US as well.



Erik Mosekilde

What do you think is the future for interdisciplinary science?

Interdisciplinary scientific activities have probably always experienced difficult times. The reason for this is, of course, that practitioners of such activities are considered as amateurs in their second field and sometimes even as traitors to their original discipline. It may also be difficult to establish strict criteria of quality in such areas, because publications always have to include a certain pedagogical element. However, interdisciplinary areas are often the areas where

new science is born and where the major challenges are found. In our view, biological physics and systems biology are already so well established that they will soon become major disciplines in their own right. Hence, we do not foresee difficulties for the funding in these areas.

The main difficulty for the two disciplines is the fact that the educational system in many cases is unprepared. Hence, much too few courses in physics and mathematics are offered to students of biology and medicine, and too few courses in biological disciplines are required by students of mathematics and physics.

What advice can you give to young scientists in interdisciplinary research?

It is very important that the group you join, either as a PhD-student or a postdoc, functions well and operates at a high international level. In view of the problems we have sketched above it is also clear that you need to maintain a quality in your research that exceeds, or at least matches, the quality reached in other areas. If you can manage this, you are likely to have more fun in your work than most of your peers in the established disciplines. Please remember, though, that the established fields also develop, and if they control most of the funding they may suddenly swallow the concepts and ideas of a smaller field.

CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENT US-Africa Advanced Studies Institute Cairo Jan 2008

**An NSF-sponsored US-Africa Advanced Studies Institute on Environmental and Biological Applications of Lasers (EBAL 2008) will be held in Cairo, Egypt
January 19-28, 2008.**

There are some limited funds available to support the travel of senior researchers and graduate students.

Graduate students can present their work in the Poster sessions.

Information about the Institute is available at

<http://www.nileslaser.edu.eg/index.html>.

Anyone interested should send a brief bio and abstract by September 14, 2007 to

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PRL HIGHLIGHTS

Soft Matter, Biological, &
Inter-disciplinary Physics Articles from
Physical Review Letters

1 June 2007

Vol 98, Number 22, Articles (22xxxx)
Articles published 26 May - 1 Jun 2007
<http://scitation.aip.org/dbt/dbt.jsp?KEY=PRLTAO&Volume=98&Issue=22>

**Evidence for Viscoelastic Effects in
Surface Capillary Waves of Molten
Polymer Films**

Zhang Jiang, Hyunjung Kim, X. Jiao, H. Lee,
Y.-J. Lee, Y. Byun, S. Song, D. Eom, C. Li,
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D. Lairez, J.-P. Carton, G. Zalczer, and J.
Pelta
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8 June 2007

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Colloid Particles in the Interaction Field of a Disclination Line in a Nematic Phase

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Modulated Structures in Bent-Core Liquid Crystals: Two Faces of One Phase

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M. Braun, C. v. Korff Schmising, M. Kiel, N. Zhavoronkov, J. Dreyer, M. Bargheer, T. Elsaesser, C. Root, T. E. Schrader, P. Gilch, W. Zinth, and M. Woerner
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RAPID COMMUNICATIONS

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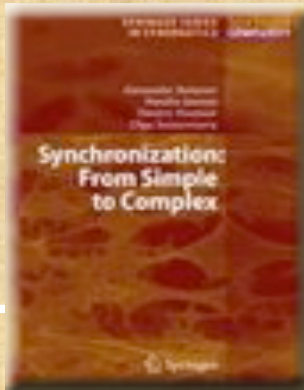
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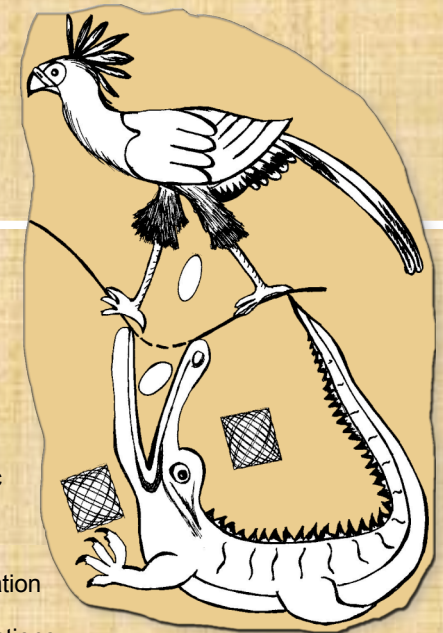
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