Meeting signals a turning point in European neuroscience

A record number of participants from 22 countries made their way to this year's Forum of European Neuroscience, held in late June in Berlin. The 4000 plus attendance was double that of the last meeting two years ago, an increase attributed largely to better conference publicity, the use of a pan-European email list with 8,000 entries and a low registration fee of 95 Deutsche Marks (US$50) for students—an enticement which led to this group making up one third of the attendees. Although the number falls far short of the 20,000 plus attendees at the annual US neuroscience meeting, many viewed the turnout as a triumph and a turning point in European neuroscience research.

Statistics showed that around one third of the participants were German, 13 percent French, eight percent British and six percent from the US. Two former presidents of the US Society for Neuroscience were also spotted at the meeting.

In addition to gaining strength through increasing numbers, Europe's neuroscience community is also seeking more financial support from Brussels—home of the European Parliament. "The era of small, national solutions is over," declared Anders Björklund, outgoing president of the European Neuroscience Association (ENA).

In support of this effort, it was announced in Berlin that the ENA is to be dissolved and replaced with a new pan-European organization—the Federation of European Neuroscience Societies (FENS)—a group with a stronger emphasis on clinical research. Talks are already being held with medical organizations such as the European Neurological Society, which has indicated its willingness to operate a joint conference with FENS.

Willem Hendrik Gispen, director of the Rudolf-Magnus-Institute for Brain Research at the University of Utrecht, The Netherlands, has been elected as the first FENS president and will serve a two-year term. Gispen's intimate knowledge of European Union research projects was a key factor in his appointment. One of his priorities is to persuade politicians to increase support for neuroscience research.

Gispen will point out to Eurocrats the reluctance of European post-docs to return from the US. "Presently, many excellent [European] scientists don't like coming back because there's a lack of employment opportunities. We want to stop that brain drain. They see an abundance of opportunities in the US. In contrast, there is little security for research positions in European neuroscience," says Gispen. The next European meeting will be held in Brighton, UK, June 24–28th, 2000.

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Mapping the biomedical research landscape

Based on an evaluation of 215,000 scientific papers published between 1988–95, the UK is maintaining its share of the world's biomedical research publications at ten percent. This data comes from a report produced by the Wellcome Trust—*Mapping the Landscape*—which also shows that an increase in charity and pharmaceutical industry funding has compensated for the relative decline in government support.

The first in a series of such analyses, *Mapping the Landscape* shows that the number of biomedical research papers increased by one-third during this period, and in 1995 accounted for just over half of all UK science publications. This biomedical:scientific ratio is the same in the US and compares with a world average of 45 percent and 37 percent for Germany.

The UK's strongest fields of research with respect to percentage share of the world's output are tropical medicine (14) and arthritis and rheumatism (13.5), whereas genetics has seen the greatest increase in publications (9.3 average annual percentage growth). Analysis of author addresses shows that the UK scientists collaborate most frequently with counterparts in the US, but inter-European liaisons (particularly with Spain and Portugal) are increasing most rapidly.

Charities are catching up with the government in terms of financial support for biomedical research—32 percent of papers acknowledged non-profit funding in 1995, compared with 34 percent citing the government. The UK government contribution to gross expenditure on R&D declined from 40 to 33 percent between 1987 and 1995, meaning that the UK has the smallest such contribution compared with the other G7 countries. Industry financed 17 percent of research work. Papers listing multiple sources of funding were also discovered to be the most influential in terms of impact factor.

The majority of the publications acknowledging government funding were in the fields of genetics and developmental biology, whereas research supported by charity focused on multiple sclerosis and oncology. Tropical medicine is the area most often funded by the Wellcome Trust. The pharmaceutical industry backs cardiology and neuroscience papers, and biotechnology companies favor immunology research.

The report also reveals that, at least for biomedicine, there has been a relative decline in clinical versus basic research. This was an unexpected result given the increased proportion of grant money coming from industrial sponsors, and government efforts such as the Foresight Programme launched in 1994, which strives to divert funding away from basic research and towards more commercially exploitable discoveries.

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