

From the bottom of a DNA cocktail glass

The first European Biotech Week, which took place from September 30 to October 4, was a continent-wide blast of public engagement. Europe's national biotech associations, 20 of them, teamed up with EuropaBio, the Brussels-based pan-European biotech body, to set up the events in which the unseen and unknown benefits of biotech were



Fondazione *Marino Golinelli* in Bologna, one of the sites taking part in Biotech Week.

explained to the general public. The events took place in conventional seminar rooms but also in charity shops, through theatre, art exhibitions and jewellery making, and even through the bottom of a glass of DNA cocktail. "We want to create a dialog with the public to shift perceptions," said Nathalie Moll, secretary general of EuropaBio. "Biotechnology is pervasive, like electricity, but no one knows about it, or the ones that do, know about it for the wrong reasons."

European Biotech Week was inspired by a similar event, run over several years by BIOTECCanada. The context is very different in Europe of course, given the many languages, cultures, legal and regulatory frameworks, and huge variations in the maturity of the sector in different countries. "National associations are working to develop a good environment for biotech in their countries, but they don't have the time to engage with the general public. By devoting one week to public engagement across Europe, we can maximize impact without causing too much distraction from the everyday tasks," Moll said.

Negative attitudes to biotech in Europe have largely been driven by disputes about the safety of genetically modified crops. Embryonic stem cell research and unregulated cell therapy have also been a source of controversy, most notably in Italy, where there has been a national scandal over the administration of unlicensed stem cell therapies.

For Moll, who is half-Italian and former head of public affairs of the country's industry body, Assobiotech, it was particularly pleasing to see Italy leading the way, hosting the most events for the week. In Italy, despite its strong underpinnings in research and a well-established pharma industry, some aspects of biotech are deemed controversial, and this has held back the development of the sector. So it was significant that the government endorsed the events, Moll said.

A grand opening ceremony in Rome was followed by events around the country, highlighting the role of biotech in medicine, biorefineries, agriculture, diagnostics and in fostering economic growth. Unpopular aspects of biotech were debated with school children through PlayDecide, a game format designed to frame discussions about impacts, risks, concerns and benefits of advanced research. The aim was to show how biotech connects to daily life and to help gamers arrive at compromises in complex technical subjects.

DNA became the motif for a jewellery-making class, was explained through theatre, extracted from pocket fluff and imbibed in DNA cocktails.

The dates were chosen to coincide with the discovery of the structure of DNA by Francis Crick and James Watson in 1953, but Moll hopes to make Biotech Week an annual event. This will provide an opportunity to showcase the benefits of biotech and also to demonstrate the importance of policies relating to biotech at an EU level, believes Steven Bates, CEO of the UK BioIndustry Association.

Beyond this, "putting biotechnology into its practical context is an important part of our work," Bates said. He himself appeared with researchers funded by the British Heart Foundation (BHF) at one of the medical charity's shops, in Peterborough. "Taking scientists to talk in one of BHF's shops is a way of saying thank you: we wanted to thank people for buying a book or a piece of second-hand furniture and show them how the money is used to develop new medicines and the contribution biotechnology makes to this," said Bates.

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Corrigendum: From the bottom of a DNA cocktail glass

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In the version of this article initially published, Natalie Moll's previous affiliation was incorrectly given as former head of Assobiotec. She is former head of public affairs for Assobiotec. The error has been corrected in the HTML and PDF versions of the article.