

Many journals have been persuaded to hold editorial board meetings in Berlin, as have many European neuroscience research networks, and several grant-giving organizations will have stands at the exhibition.

These factors alone could be sufficient to turn a traditionally dull ENA meeting into a lively event which organizers hope could also serve as an employment exchange. But Berlin also has an additional cultural dimension.

### Support for the meeting

A national lottery grant to promote neuroscience locally during the meeting will pay for a series of popular films with neuroscience themes to be shown in local cinemas, each followed by discussions with scientists. This grant is also paying for an exhibition of contemporary artists — including a couple of Picasso and Klee originals — at a prestigious gallery in Potsdamer Platz.

The Institute for Anatomy in east Berlin's big teaching hospital, the Charité, is holding an exhibition about the history of neuroscience (see opposite). A grant from the Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives — which funds the press work around the US neuroscience meeting — will pay for professional press services, another first for the ENA.

All the signs are that the meeting will be a success. But many neuroscientists are still awaiting the long-term outcome of the ENA's relaunch before accepting that a European society can be sufficiently powerful to compete effectively with the pull of the United States.

Indeed, according to Norman Bowery, professor of neuroscience at the University of Birmingham, the research community sees the Berlin meeting as “a sort of make-or-break for the European society”.

Richard Morris, professor of neuroscience at the University of Edinburgh, points out that on average 3,000 British neuroscientists go to the US meeting every year compared with the 500 who attend ENA meetings, and this could be a hard trend to reverse.

But he finds the Berlin meeting very attractive, adding that sometimes the US meeting can be simply too big. “Four thousand attendees is the right number to allow you to be able to talk to your fellow scientists instead of just being able to wave to them across an aircraft hangar,” he says.

The national societies, despite their early scepticism, are now fully behind the idea of FENS. The French society, for example, is providing 50 travel grants to allow its young members to attend.

Paul Bolam, professor of neuropharmacology at the University of Oxford and secretary of the British Neuroscience Association — one of the largest national neuroscience societies in Europe — says he is confident that negative feelings towards the ENA will be reversed by the Berlin meeting. □

## Cell biologists set out on the path of reform

[MUNICH] The increasing economic and political integration of Europe has made many European-level scientific societies keen to increase their appeal to European scientists, who tend to view their national societies — followed by US societies — as their spiritual homes.

Particularly radical changes are now afoot for cell biologists in Europe, who are currently associated, through their national bodies, to a federation called the European Cell Biology Organization (ECBO).

According to Jean Grünberg, a professor of biochemistry at the University of Geneva, ECBO has “little power or flexibility” and does not have “a true European dimension”. Most importantly, he adds, it does not reflect the full scope of cell biology.

A new society, called the European Life Sciences Organization (ELSO), will be launched in autumn, and will hold its first meeting in Geneva in 2000. It will include all molecular sciences relevant to cell biology, from developmental biology to neurobiology.

Although it has wide and enthusiastic backing within the community, ELSO is largely the brainchild of Kai Simons, senior scientist at the European Molecular Biology Laboratory in Heidelberg and director of the Max Planck Society's new Institute of Molecular Cell Biology and Genetics, currently being constructed in Dresden. But it has very broad support.

Simons has been elected as founding president of the society in a ballot organized by an ad hoc selection committee. He feels it is “time that scientists in Europe no longer have to go to the United States to attend a big meeting”.

ECBO meetings, he says, have tended to suffer the malaise common to so many meetings of European-level scientific society meetings, namely low attendance, high registration fees and a variable quality of scientific programmes (see main article).

Simons — who himself comes from Finland — says that large, relatively inexpensive and high-quality European meetings are particularly important for young people from small countries who cannot afford to go to the United States, and who might not be invited to small specialist meetings.

To keep fees down, ELSO meetings will, like those of the recently revamped European Neuroscience Association (ENA — see opposite), avoid using professional conference organizers. To ensure that experience in organizing conferences is not lost, ELSO meetings will be rotated around three centres, one of which will be Geneva.

Like the ENA, ELSO is keen to offer strong scientific programmes and lively meetings that scientists cannot afford to miss. But, in direct contrast to the ENA (which is about to relaunch itself as the Federation of European Neuroscience Societies), it will do this by setting itself up as a society of individual members, given that ECBO already exists as a federation of national societies.

ELSO will model itself on the American Society for Cell Biology (ASCB), which covers all molecular sciences relevant to cell biology, and whose meetings can attract up to 10,000 researchers. Like the ASCB, it wants to wield influence as a lobbying force as well as to hold scientifically important meetings. These, it hopes,

will help young scientists by attracting enough people at both senior and junior level to act as a form of employment exchange.

Paul Nurse, director of the Imperial Cancer Research Foundation in London, is one of many who agree that that Europe's cell biologists, particularly young researchers, “need a Mecca equivalent to the ASCB, which does not require them to travel quite so far”.

Another is Daniel Louvard, director of the research division of the Institut Curie in Paris and current president of ECBO. ELSO will not replace ECBO, he says. “But if it is successful, after a few years people are going to ask if we really need to have both — and FEBS [Federation of European Biochemical Societies] as well.”

Other European scientific societies have also tried to launch, or relaunch, themselves as an important focus for the interests of their members, although so far with less success than the societies for cell biology and neurosciences.

The two European geological societies — the European Union of Geosciences and the European Geophysical Society — have been making efforts to fuse into a single body with the scientific and political strength of the American Geophysical Union. These have so far failed, apparently because they could not agree on its final structure.

But the European Federation of Pharmacological Societies (EPHAR), set up only a few years ago, could be at the bottom of the steep learning curve for running a European society. The success of its second meeting, to be held in Hungary next year, is being viewed as a touchstone for its survival.

A.A.