

# And the winner is....

**Recognition by one's peers is usually the only reward for a scientist. But recent popular awards show that the perception of scientists is changing.**

**A**round the time of the new year, magazines and newspapers rush to confer their own 'person of the year' awards on unsuspecting nominees. Although the criteria for selection may be obscure, the winners, not surprisingly, usually come from the media-friendly worlds of the stage and screen, politics and sport. Recently, however, the general public, newspapers and even Queen Elizabeth II have added scientists to their lists of favourite people.

Among these, two of the pioneers of genome research have just been recognized for their contributions. Although they share a common goal, these men set about their work and portrayed themselves to the non-scientific community in very different ways.

The project to solve the complete blueprint of the human genome, which involved public-private collaboration between laboratories around the world, was determined in 2000, years earlier than initial predictions. One of the prime driving forces behind this accelerated timetable was the intervention of J. Craig Venter's company, Celera Genomics, in 1998. For this single-minded pursuit, *Time* magazine nominated Venter as runner-up in their Person of the Year competition (he was beaten by President-elect George W. Bush, and shares his runner-up status with *Harry Potter* author J. K. Rowling). Venter is an often-outspoken entrepreneur, and through his rivalry with Francis Collins, the US director of the publicly funded Human Genome Project, has become more visible in the public eye than any other player in the genomics world.

At the other end of the spectrum is John Sulston, head of the UK's Human Genome Project. A less abrasive, more unassuming figure in the genomics community, Sulston was nominated for a knighthood in the Queen's New Year's honours list. Not only did he help to complete sequencing of the *Caenorhabditis elegans* genome in 1998, but he has also led British scientists throughout the genome-sequencing years. Sulston and Venter cannot be further apart in terms of media perception, but it would be interesting to compare how many Americans have heard of Venter with how many British citizens know of Sulston.

Another scientist who has captured the public's eye in Britain is Susan Greenfield. Greenfield is a lecturer in synaptic pharmacology at Oxford University, head of the Royal Institution, writer, television presenter and now also 'Woman of the Year', as voted for by readers of a national newspaper in the UK. For a scientist to be voted by the public as woman of the year is indeed a huge accolade, although hosting a popular science-based television series certainly contributed to her profile. Greenfield, who has also posed in the star-studded magazine *Hello!* in a miniskirt, has been quoted as "making science as approachable as high heels". Although the media adore her, other researchers have questioned her outspoken opinions on women in science. Nevertheless, there is no question as to her scientific capabilities.

So is media coverage of scientists, with their foibles and flaws (and, dare we say it, egos) necessarily a bad thing? As both Venter and Greenfield have shown, with a bit of panache and moxie, you can take your science out of the laboratory to the people, garner a significant amount of press attention (thereby gaining a reputation as a high-profile scientist), and win media-driven awards, but you may also antagonize your scientific peers along the way. Alternatively, you can labour quietly without much media attention until you find yourself, like Sulston, capturing the public's interest. In the end, though, the presence of scientists at the forefront of society's consciousness is a positive step towards dispelling the image of the 'science geek'. □