

nature cell biology

The changing nature of cell biology in Europe

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Cell biology research in Europe revolves around the national cell biology societies, which are organized into a federation called the European Cell Biology Organization (ECBO). The biennial ECBO conferences are meant to be a major event for European cell biologists, but the variable quality of the scientific programmes has led to a downward cycle of high registration fees and low attendance. There has been a conscious effort to reverse this trend, and the conferences held in 1995 (in Heidelberg) and this past May (in Bologna) had strong scientific programmes. But the meeting in Bologna still attracted less than 1,000 scientists, comparing poorly with the American Association of Cell Biology (ASCB) whose annual meetings draw more than 8,000 participants. Why has ECBO failed to reach its full potential?

According to Jean Gruenberg of the University of Geneva, ECBO does not truly represent the broad scope of modern cell biology. Some also feel that ECBO has not been effective in lobbying the European Parliament — perhaps because it has never really had a mandate to do so. But matters in Europe are now set to change. A new society, the European Life Science Organization (ELSO; <http://www.elseo.org>), will hold its first meeting in Geneva in September 2000. A nomination committee, chaired by Paul Nurse of the Imperial Cancer Research Fund, elected Kai Simons as president of ELSO. Simons (who has played a key role in establishing the cell biology programme at the European Molecular Biology Laboratories in Heidelberg) has strong views on the role of ELSO and firm ideas on how to implement its agenda.

ELSO is modelling itself on the ASCB and will reflect the modern face of cell biology. It will welcome traditional cell biologists, molecular biologists, geneticists, developmental biologists, neurobiologists, immunologists, biochemists and microbiologists, and it will be a society formed by individual members rather than a federation of national societies. This marks a fundamental difference between ECBO and ELSO; it should make ELSO less susceptible to the constraints that can arise when a national society is responsible for hosting a conference (namely, balancing national interests and speaker quality). ELSO conferences will eventually take place annually and be rotated through three cities; they will also save money by organizing the meeting internally, rather than paying high fees to professional conference organizers. This should allow ELSO to become familiar with each venue and optimize its use of facilities for poster sessions, parallel symposiums, and so on.

ELSO also hopes to gain a mandate to lobby the European Parliament on behalf of its members. By banding together, life scientists should be more effective at communicating their needs, concerns and achievements to politicians and the public.

But does Europe need both ELSO and ECBO? At the recent ECBO conference in Bologna, the ECBO committee made a conscious decision not to propose another ECBO meeting. According to Simons, they are 'waiting to see if the ELSO meeting in Geneva is a success'. If it is, then ECBO is likely to disband, leaving the national societies free to concentrate on scientific and political issues within their own countries.

Nature Cell Biology is optimistic about the future of ELSO, in part because cell biology research is thriving in Europe. Europe already supports several small, high-quality specialist meetings, such as the European Science Foundation conference series (<http://www.esf.org>), and joint meetings, such as the upcoming ASCB/European Molecular Biology Organization conference on membrane traffic and the cytoskeleton (<http://www.ascb.org/ascb/>). Given the proper encouragement, Europeans may no longer need to travel so far and spend so much to attend a high-quality, all-inclusive cell biology conference.