

There is a natural turnover and renewal of the CDC's members, who join and leave the committee on a voluntary basis. Over the years, the balance has shifted towards a younger, more gender-balanced committee. The focus has also moved away from science policy and towards more activities that can directly help ELSO members and young researchers in general. The CDC has enlarged and consolidated the range of events it hosts at the ELSO congress, which include the ELSO Early Career Award presentation and lecture, a Career Mentoring Lunch, a session illustrating scientific career choices outside academia, a showcase session about funding sources (especially for early-stage careers), and a debate session that gives ELSO's grass-roots membership the opportunity to voice their opinions about science policy



issues. At this year's meeting we will also try a new idea giving young scientists the chance to hear about the career choices, decisions, and difficulties faced by one highly successful scientist – Nobel laureate Eric Wieschaus has agreed to be our subject for this 2007 'Meet a Mentor' event. More information about the CDC activities at the ELSO Congress can be found on the CDC's web pages (www.elseo-cdc.org).

Throughout the year, CDC members continue to develop these web pages as a resource for young life scientists. The pages currently provide directions to information about international PhD programmes, students' and postdocs' organizations, mentoring resources, funding resources, job op-

portunities and women in science resources. In addition, it organizes and executes the selection procedure for the annual ELSO Early Career Award. In 2005, the CDC also created the ELSO Database of Expert Women in the molecular life sciences in Europe, which currently contains the details of more than 400 expert women in this field. The database

is a resource that scientists, editors, granting agencies, etc. can use to find women with appropriate expertise. The Database of Expert Women owes its existence largely to CDC member Karla Neugebauer, who has worked tirelessly to ensure its functionality, to encourage appropriately qualified women to register, and to promote it to likely users.

You can read more about the database in Neugebauer's article in this issue and you can use the database online from the CDC web pages.

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One of the functions of the Database of Expert Women is to increase the number of women who speak and chair sessions at conferences. Women remain generally underrepresented on the platform at meetings compared to their participation in the audience. The CDC is trying to raise awareness of this issue by collecting data on women's representation among speakers at ad-

vertised meetings, and by giving feedback to meeting organizers. If you want to contribute to this exercise you can download a feedback

form from the CDC web pages to send to conference organizers and to provide the CDC with the data you collect.

Like ELSO, the CDC is a new and youthful organization that is slowly developing a palette of activities and functions to promote the careers of ELSO members and European researchers in general. Its members are volunteers and it runs on a minimal budget. We therefore welcome all offers of help either with specific tasks or with its general activities. To volunteer your help, please contact the current CDC Co-ordinator, Margarete Heck (Margarete.Heck@ed.ac.uk).

Margarete Heck

is Professor of Cell Biology and Genetics and Wellcome Trust University Award Holder at the Queen's Medical Research Institute, University of Edinburgh. She is Co-ordinator of ELSO's Career Development Committee (CDC).

(Carol Featherstone, see p. 29)



The ELSO congress

Filling a Gap

by Carol Featherstone

As ELSO President, Kai Simons, recounts in his article in this issue, mounting a large congress for the molecular life sciences on European soil was the original driving force behind the

creation of ELSO. Every year, Europe's scientists cross the Atlantic in large numbers to attend the big US society meetings in their field (cell biology, neuroscience, etc.) but, until 2000, there was little or nothing

in Europe to meet this apparent thirst for an event that can, at once, provide a general update on the most exciting research of the moment, a specific session on one's personal field of interest, a great opportu-

nity to network, and the chance to catch up with old friends and colleagues.

Simons and a panel of other eminent European scientists (including Kim Nasmyth, Paul Nurse and Christiane Nüsslein-Volhard) created ELSO to meet this need with a similar event at home, surfing the wave of political integration in Europe and integration of the previously distinct disciplines that now comprise the molecular life sciences. Of course, there are other important meetings in Europe. EMBO organizes



very successful small meetings and workshops but it has no large congress equivalent to, for instance, the American Society for Cell Biology (ASCB)'s annual meeting. For many years, the national member societies of the Federation of European Biochemical Societies (FEBS) have organized, in rotation, quite a large annual meeting under the FEBS banner, but their focus on biochemistry misses the excitement of the new molecular life sciences.

ELSO was inaugurated in 1998 and produced its first congress in Geneva in June of 2000. Since then, it has run another four congresses, two in Nice (2002, 2004) and two in Dresden (2003, 2005). The date of the event has settled into a regular late summer slot around the start of September; this year's meeting is taking place on 1–4 September in Dresden. Thereafter, conference centres are already booked in Nice for ELSO 2008 (30 August – 2 September), and in Amsterdam for ELSO 2009 (28 August – 1 September).

The scientific programme of the meetings generally follows the successful formula tried and tested by the ASCB. The main congress is preceded by an afternoon of up to twelve concurrent sub-group meetings organized by individual scientists. The very focused topics of sub-group meetings are selected each year from proposals put forward in March by scientists wishing to organize a meeting. The main congress begins formally, usually on a Saturday evening, with one or two Keynote Lectures. ELSO has made

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a tradition of inviting recent Nobel laureates (Tim Hunt, Sydney Brenner and Peter Agre spring to mind) to give these entertaining as well as informative talks, but it is now branching out to include also provocative speakers like Rick Klausner, then of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, who in 2005 challenged us to think about our responsibilities as life scientists for solving global health problems.

The serious work begins the next day with the morning plenary lectures featur-

ing internationally acclaimed speakers who invariably have something new and interesting to tell us. This is an opportunity to catch-up on fields outside our own and to hear about the most exciting latest developments. The science continues in the afternoons with 7–9 concurrent mini-symposia that each feature five or six lectures on a targeted topic, often including one or two speakers whose poster abstracts were particularly intriguing. This gives a valuable opportunity to junior colleagues looking for visibility and experience as speakers.

In between, the poster sessions run continuously and are always busy with people. In 2005, the congress had over 600 poster presentations, many from graduate students and postdocs. The buzz of activity around the posters indicates how useful these sessions are, especially to young researchers looking for feedback on their work, to set up new collaborations and to network with people who might, one day, provide them with a helping hand up the career ladder. The posters are the more successful because they are housed within the exhibition hall, creating a natural focus that benefits both the exhibitors of commercial goods and services for life science and the scientists manning their posters.

Besides the scientific programme, the ELSO congress features a rich programme of career development and training events. Most are organized by ELSO's Career Development Committee (CDC), but over the past

few years workshops organized by companies like Zeiss, Leica and Bitplane have entered the programme, attracting enthusiastic participation from scientists' young and old who want to learn how to use the latest technologies and find out what they can do.



The CDC events include the Early Career Award presentation and lecture. The recipient of this annual prize – a researcher who has made an extraordinary contribution to her or his field and who, normally, received his or her PhD less than ten years ago – is selected by the CDC each year from nominations solicited from the scientific community in March and April. Previous awardees include Maria Blasco, Elena Conti, Jan Ellenberg, Elisa Izaurralde, and Jürgen Knoblich. The CDC's Career Mentoring Lunch has also become a hugely successful regular feature of the ELSO congress, giving young researchers the opportunity to benefit from the mentoring advice of more experienced colleagues over an informal lunch. In addition, there is a session illustrating career choices outside academia, a showcase session about funding sources (especially for early-stage careers), a debate session calls on ELSO's grassroots membership to voice their opinion about science policy issues, and at this year's meeting we will try a new idea giving young scientists the chance to hear about the career decisions, choices and difficulties faced by one highly successful scientist – Eric Wieschaus has agreed to be our subject for this 2007 'Meet a Mentor' event.

ELSO is a young organization with a special focus on the needs of young scientists

and a very young membership. Typically, close to 40% of the participants at the congress are students (and the rest are young at heart!). Not surprisingly, then, the congress is also an occasion to party and to sample the nightlife of a different city. Within the conference centre, ELSO holds a 'get-together' before the opening Keynote Lectures and a party after the 'Cinema of the Cell' session which shows scientists' home-made 'BioClips' – multimedia presentations of science in the spirit of music videos.

In an effort to meet the needs of students and postdocs, ELSO has deliberately kept the registration fees for its meeting as low as possible by organizing the meeting 'in house' with a small but very efficient staff. Also, until last year it levied no subscription fee from its members. So far, it has survived on a shoestring budget raised from the registration fees for participants and commercial exhibitors, as well as from sponsorship by many companies, non-profit organizations, regional authorities and foundations. However, if ELSO is to develop further, this hand-to-mouth existence has to change so that the organization can employ people to implement its burgeoning activities throughout the year. A regular membership fee would help to provide the regular revenue stream that ELSO needs to continue to evolve as an organization.

The ELSO congress is now established as a regular event on the calendar of European life scientists. It is beginning to attract interest from new partners through

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which we hope to enhance the congress with a richer programme and

additional training and career events. Most of all, we need to spread the word about ELSO to all molecular life scientists in Europe, to persuade them to come to the meeting in greater numbers and to support ELSO and all it aims to do to improve the environment for scientists in Europe.

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