

A new year resolution from the SGM President

2003 opened with SARS in China teeing up for its transmission to Hong Kong, Singapore, Vietnam and Canada in the spring and the summer. It closed with a case of BSE in the United States, and the Secretary of the US Department of Agriculture saying that she would be eating beef for Christmas. Shades of John Gummer and a succession of English Chief Medical Officers addicted to eating it 'with confidence'! As ever, the objects of our professional attention have been showing their teeth, reminding us that we share the world with them, that there is much unfinished business, and that we ignore them at our peril. Even if influenza virus continues to be relatively quiet, noroviruses have continued to make life miserable for passengers on cruise liners and for patients in hospitals. The best that could be said about those dangerous institutions is that to get projectile vomiting from a virus there is generally a better deal than being infected with another well-ensconced hospital resident, MRSA.

A major outcome of all these events has been their political impact. Senior Chinese officials were sacked because of SARS. Just one case of BSE immediately became an emergency to be handled at the top level of the US administration. Yet another government initiative to control MRSA was announced in Westminster at the end of the year. So it is reasonable to conclude that politicians need microbiologists as never before. Many on both sides know that. But relationships could be much better. I also believe that the way the government gets scientific advice is far from perfect in that it only uses a fraction of the scientific expertise that is available. The SGM has a major role here. One of the things that has impressed me most since becoming President has been to see its highly effective behind-the-scenes activities in promoting microbiology. My New Year resolution is to foster this as best I can. But it is you, the members, who will do the work. Go to it!

● **Professor Hugh Pennington, SGM President**

BELOW:
SGM President Hugh Pennington discusses microbiology with Sarah Boyack, MSP, at the recent RSC Science and Parliament event (see p. 29 for more details).
PHOTO RON FRASER, SGM



Communicating microbiology workshop

29 April 2004, Marlborough House, Reading

As scientists we fully understand the importance of carrying out microbiological studies, but the public, which tends just to hear about controversial issues such as GM foods and MMR vaccination, representing only a tiny fraction of UK research, may have a very negative view of science. Millions of pounds are spent each year on research involving micro-organisms and yet the public often perceive it as esoteric and unlikely to impact significantly on their lives. What can we do to change their minds and alert them to some of the amazing discoveries being made?

Scientists have a responsibility to explain their findings to the world outside of academia. Indeed, this is now required by many funding bodies. SGM, which has always striven to improve the public understanding of microbiology, announces an exciting initiative to help its members communicate their research and disseminate it to the wider community.

The intention is to produce a research-focused promotional publication. This will have an attractive, glossy format and take a case study approach. It will be distributed free of charge to schools, at careers fairs and at science events for the public, but it will also be a useful tool in influencing policymakers involved in research funding. The obvious approach would be to commission the articles from SGM scientists who are already good at writing for the public. Instead the Society is taking the opportunity to offer training to scientists who have less experience in this area, but wish to develop their science communication skills.

The one-day training workshop will take place on 29 April at SGM Headquarters in Reading. It will be run by Myc Riggulsford, a professional facilitator with extensive experience of science journalism. Each participant will work with Myc to produce, by the end of the day, a one-page article in a readable style that communicates the key points about a piece of their research and its relevance to society. The articles will be co-ordinated by SGM staff who will also edit and design the publication and get it into print. Key points from the workshop will be summarized and the resultant factsheet posted on the SGM website for the benefit of all members.

Interested in taking part?

Each participant will get an expenses-paid day out at Marlborough House, professional development in communication skills and positive publicity for themselves and their institutions. They will also fulfil the promises made in their grant applications to disseminate their research findings to the public. Copyright for the articles will rest with SGM.

There will be places on the course for 10–12 microbiologists of final year postgraduate level or above. The objective is to cover a broad range of topics in the publication. If you wish to be considered for a place, please email Faye Jones (f.jones@sgm.ac.uk) giving full contact details, a brief CV and a summary of your research topic.

The deadline for applications is **12 March 2004**.