



The Society has a broad programme of activities to promote microbiology to the public, the media, opinion-formers and policymakers. 2007 has seen some great successes, as **Lucy Goodchild** reports. Contact Lucy at [l.goodchild@sgm.ac.uk](mailto:l.goodchild@sgm.ac.uk)

## Microbiology in the Media

*SGM September 2007 meeting, Edinburgh*

For every SGM meeting, the public affairs office produces press releases to get the research presented to the public. The plenary session this time was 'Food, fluids, fingers, faeces and flies: food- and water-borne pathogens', so we knew there would be some newsworthy stories.

We selected over 30 abstracts to be the subjects of press releases. After asking the authors whether they would like to be involved, just 15 abstracts remained. Topics ranged from Hepatitis E in European

pork to the self-assembly of the *Clostridium difficile* protein coat and its applications in nanotechnology. The press releases were produced in close collaboration with the authors and sent to our extensive list of reporters a week before the meeting. We also made them available to journalists on EurekAlert and AlphaGalileo, two online science news centres.

The meeting started on Monday 3 September 2007. As I was the main contact for the press releases on site, I made sure I had my mobile by my side from the beginning. Sure enough, media calls began to pour in. We had enquiries from all over the world about the research being presented and a variety of publications were interested in the stories, from *Grocer* magazine through to BBC online and *Nature*. I was kept rather busy over the next few days and the calls kept coming for weeks after the meeting.

I am still keeping tabs on the coverage of the meeting. The Society was mentioned in hundreds of places, both in print and online. Some of my favourite coverage included articles in *Le Monde*, *De Standaard*, [www.thepoultrysite.com](http://www.thepoultrysite.com), United Press International and Ten to the Minus Nine.

## FIS 2007

The Federation of Infection Societies holds an annual conference. In 2007, SGM was the conference's host society, and was responsible for publicizing the research to the media. At first glance, there was a plethora of brilliant news stories. Research covered new and existing superbugs, which always make the front pages. However, we encountered two problems. The first was selecting relatively few stories from so much newsworthy research and the second was finding authors willing to participate. Medics seem to be strangely reticent in this respect. Despite all our efforts, only four scientists agreed to press releases.

I was unable to attend the conference, so yet again I made sure my contact details were clear on the press releases. Although I had received a taster during SGM's September meeting, nothing could have prepared me for the response. One of the press releases, about a new strain of community-acquired MRSA, was selected for promotion by the Press Association. On Tuesday 27 November 2007, the day before the conference was due to start, the phone began to ring first thing in the morning. The pace increased and before long I was answering three phones. We had calls from UK broadsheets and tabloids, as well as television channels. The journalists wanted to speak to the author, Dr Marina Morgan from the University of Exeter. Marina was on her way to the conference in Cardiff, but she took all the calls nonetheless and was exactly what the press were looking for.

On the first day of the conference, news cameras appeared and the story made almost all of the national newspapers, as well as many regional ones. Dr Chris talked about it on *This Morning* on TV and I was happy to hear a news bulletin on Marina's research while I was on my way to the airport. With Marina's help, we certainly reached a wide audience with the research!

## Press briefing at the Science Media Centre

### *Microbes and climate change*

Climate change has been at the top of the public agenda for a while and we had become increasingly concerned that the important role of microbes was hardly mentioned. To redress this, we decided to run a press briefing on the topic.

The microbial aspect of climate change is notoriously complex, so we first had to break it down into manageable chunks. We split the briefing into four sections, based on climatically important gases: microbial methane production, carbon dioxide and ocean acidification, nitrous oxide and microbes, and oceanic dimethyl sulphide production.

The briefing was held on 10 December 2007 at the Royal Institution in London. The national news media were invited, as were press officers from contributing universities. The speakers – James Chong (University of York), Ian Joint (Plymouth Marine Laboratory), Mark Trimmer (Queen Mary, University of London) and Michael Steinke (University of Essex) – gave exceptional presentations; everybody was enthralled. Four journalists attended, from *Science*, the *Daily Mail*, the Press Association and BBC Radio 4. We had chosen a 'busy news day' for our briefing, so the turnout was less than we had hoped.

However, the coverage was exciting. During the briefing, we had enquiries from the *Guardian* and the *Telegraph*, both unable to attend but interested in the stories. The speakers were interviewed immediately after the briefing for Radio 4's *Farming Today*, which aired the following morning at 5.45am, and the *Daily Mail* ran a fantastic piece on methanogens. The stories were a hit online, and were chosen as blog topics in several languages. Perhaps most exhilarating was the subsequent appearance of a £1 million anaerobic digester on a farm in *The Archers*, exactly what Dr Chong had been talking about!

## Science and the Parliament 2007

The Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC) hosts 'Science and the Parliament' annually, to encourage scientists and politicians to debate key scientific issues. The 2007 event focussed on 'Energy and Climate Change – The Science Behind the Energy Debate'. SGM has a stand at the event every year, and this year Executive Secretary Ron Fraser and I attended the event at Our Dynamic Earth in Edinburgh.

Since microbes and climate change had featured so heavily in our activities in 2007, we were very excited about this event; it gave us the opportunity to bring the subject to life. SSERC very kindly lent us a digital microscope and laptop to allow delegates to see the display and helped us to set up. We showed a mix of algae and protozoa, which is lively and exciting, to highlight the climatic importance of photosynthetic microbes.

Even before the delegates arrived, people were transfixed. Staff at Our Dynamic Earth were creeping over hesitantly and asking is 'that happening right now?' They were fascinated by the protozoa, and surprised to hear about the role of algae in climate change. Many people commented that they were pleased to see us acknowledging the importance of microbes in climate change.

The Scottish Government will consider a Climate Change Bill this year and we hope that micro-organisms will be taken into account, both as an important aspect of modelling and as a key to tackling greenhouse gas emissions.

*SGM could not carry out these promotional activities without input and help from members. If you would like to be included in our database of experts, contact Lucy, or click on the link for the form at the bottom of the SGM website noticeboard page ([www.sgm.ac.uk/noticeboard.cfm](http://www.sgm.ac.uk/noticeboard.cfm)).*

## Microbiology in social media

[www.micropodonline.com](http://www.micropodonline.com)

'New media' is increasing in popularity all the time. Podcasts pop up every day and every other person has a blog. There is a small group of websites dedicated to microbiology, with *Microbiologybytes* and *Microbeworld* leading the way. However, there was no such website dedicated to providing microbiology news, information and entertainment for the general public... until now.

I have been working with Dr Lucy Harper, Communications Officer at the SfAM, to develop a brand new portal brimming with news, views, information and fun – all with a microbiological theme. Our aim is to engage with the public about microbiological issues, covering bird 'flu, home hygiene and giant fungi among many others.

Micropod was launched on 17 December with the theme 'The microbiology of Christmas'. In the first podcast, we asked residents of Reading, 'will you be eating turkey this Christmas?' We discussed the many and varied microbiological aspects to the festive season and I interviewed astrobiologist Lewis Dartnell about life in the snow. Our first blogs were about bird 'flu and the festive increase in STIs.

This year's topics will include hygiene and cleanliness, bugs in space and GM. So far, we have an editorial board of four people, but we are looking for additional helpers. If you are interested in getting involved and you are willing to attend the occasional virtual meeting (just doing our bit to save the planet), please drop us a line.

**NEW MRSA IS ON THE LOOSE**

**NEW 'KILLER MRSA' ALERT**

**THE HINDU**  
News Update Service  
Friday, December 7, 2007 - 02:00 Hrs  
Sci. & Tech.  
**Bacteria successful in cancer treatment**

SC | News

**Superbugs add to rising hospital death toll**

**Зараженные свиньи разносят гепатит Е по Европе**

**Deadly MRSA bug spreads to healthy adults**