

Faye Jones, Public Affairs Administrator, describes some SGM Microbiology Awareness Campaign activities which aim to raise the profile of microbiology to politicians and opinion-formers.

Microbiology Awareness Campaign 2005

Fighting infection



SGM's Microbiology Awareness Campaign gathered momentum on Tuesday 1 March when microbiologists went to Westminster to inform Peers and MPs that new and re-emerging infectious diseases could spell trouble if not tackled soon.

More than 40 MPs and Peers gathered on The Terrace at the House of Lords to hear a series of presentations on infection issues. It was followed by a drinks reception where the guests were able to talk to expert microbiologists.

In his introductory speech, our host, **Lord Soulsby of Swaffham Prior**, expressed concern about the closures and cutbacks in many research centres, in spite of '*science funding being assessed as secure*'. He was followed by **Professor Sir John Arbutnot** who summarized the problems of infection and described what SGM is helping to do about them.

▲ Lord Soulsby of Swaffham Prior and Dr Ian Gibson, MP in conversation with SGM Professional Affairs Officer Geoffrey Schild at the House of Lords event. *Ron Fraser, SGM*

Professor Adrian Hill, University of Oxford, explained that tuberculosis infections are increasing in the UK and that we are constantly under threat from malaria. New vaccines are desperately needed to protect people worldwide from these ancient diseases. Professor Hill amazed the audience by revealing that tuberculosis has killed more adults than any other pathogen and that more children die from malaria than any other infectious disease.

Sexually transmitted infections were also on the programme and again, the incidence is increasing, with the biggest threat coming from HIV/AIDS.

According to **Professor Robin Weiss** more people have died of HIV since 26 December 2004 than because of the Asian tsunami on that day.

Other presentations included one on the importance of educating the public about microbiology from SGM Education Officer, **Dr Susan Assinder** and a run-down by HPA Board Chairman, **Professor Sir William Stewart** of what the Health Protection Agency is doing to control infections.

A spirited discussion followed, chaired by **Dr Ian Gibson, MP**, with the speakers fielding widely ranging questions. Some of the answers were uncompromising. The audience was informed that without targeted government funding for microbiological research, serious health and economic problems would lie ahead.

The attendees were also treated to displays from various groups and

organizations working to understand, prevent and treat many key infectious diseases of humans and animals. Among these was **Dr Jodi Lindsay** of St George's Hospital Medical School in London, who emphasized the economic and health costs of treating MRSA infections in the UK. She stressed that as MRSA is becoming more dangerous and more resistant, with no new drugs or vaccines available, ring-fenced funding for research was essential. '*The current number of MRC, BBSRC, Department of Health and Wellcome Trust grants currently active on MRSA is zero and seven years after the National Audit Office highlighted the lack of research funding for antibiotic resistance, little has changed*', she said.

Other displays were on diagnosis and surveillance of disease in farmed livestock and wildlife by the Veterinary Laboratories Agency; the Food Standards Agency's strategy to reduce the incidence of food-borne disease; the Wellcome Trust's efforts at fighting malaria; animal health research by the Institute for Animal Health; and influenza by the National Institute for Medical Research, National Institute for Biological Standards and Control and the Health Protection Agency.

The staff at SGM Headquarters would like to take this opportunity to thank all of those involved in putting together the exciting programme for this event.

Faye Jones
Public Affairs Administrator