Promoting Microbiology:

A new strategy, a new representative – Tracey Duncombe

Until recently Janet Hurst and the other members of the External Relations Office have dealt with media and PR issues, and have done so with notable results. But as a society we have not had a clear system in place for promoting the SGM and microbiology as a whole.

With my recent appointment as Public Affairs Administrator things are set to change. We are in the process of developing a strategy to raise the profile of SGM and microbiology to both parliament and the media. We aim to be the voice for microbiology and microbiologists in the UK, and to achieve this through effective communication.

One important new undertaking is the development of a series of briefing papers aimed at Members of Parliament, science policy makers and journalists. The first paper on *Biofilms* is in production. The intention of these papers is to heighten awareness of novel research as well as providing authoritative information on microbiological matters of topical concern.

We also intend to promote SGM journals by publicizing some of the papers on subjects that are of general interest and to issue media releases about sessions at Society meetings.

As some of you may be aware, the SGM has a new Clinical Microbiology Group. The inaugural symposium will be held at the meeting at Heriot-Watt University next spring. For the first time both the Institute of Biomedical Sciences (IBMS) and the Royal College of Pathologists will accredit our symposia. This will assist clinicians and MLSOs, who are members of both organizations, to advance in their Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programme.

For those of you who don't have time to read the broadsheets on a daily basis, *Microbiology in the News*, covering a broad range of topical issues, is back on our website. News summaries will be posted fortnightly at www.sgm.ac.uk/pa/mic_news/micro.htm

Finally, and most importantly, a request. I am building up a database of members who are willing to speak to the media on behalf of the SGM. Individuals who wish to participate should have a strong background in the area in which they are willing to talk, preferably they should have published papers or be currently working in that field. For members who are eminent in their field I also require contacts who are willing to give an opinion on consultation documents produced by government departments. Please contact me at Marlborough House if you are able to help. Tel. 0118 988 1800; Fax 0118 988 5656; email: pa@sgm.ac.uk

A Personal Profile

My first degree was in microbial biotechnology at the University of Liverpool. I gained my PhD in the bioremediation of contaminated soil in November 1999 from the same university, during which time I took part in several initiatives to raise public awareness and promote science. I spoke two years running at the British Association (BA) Festival of Science in NERC's *Stand Up Science Show*, became a mentor for a group of 14-year-old girls during GETSET '99; stood as NERC's representative during a regional final of CREST Awards; and endeavoured to keep the attention of 100 school kids during Liverpool University's *Science on Saturdays* programme. Through participation in these activities I decided that it was time to lay down my Gilson once and for all and concentrate on promoting other peoples' work, and here I am.

Excellence and opportunity explained:

A summary of the recent DTI White Paper

Much has been made of the Department of Trade and Industry's White Paper *Excellence and Opportunity – a science and innovation strategy for the 21st century* since its publication on 26 July this year. The media, in particular, have focused on one part, namely the £4 million annual fund, which is being set up to recruit 'the David Beckhams of science'. In an attempt to create a national 'brain gain', 50 leading scientists, chosen by a panel of experts from the Royal Society, the Royal Academy of Engineers and the Wolfson Foundation research charity, would be lured to Britain with salaries of up to £100,000. At present, British universities pay professors a minimum salary of around £35,000 to £40,000. Whether or not this will halt the 'brain drain' is arguable. The feeling of many scientists quoted in *THES* (28/7/00) was that it did not address the fundamental problem that some of the brightest young scientists choose not to pursue careers in academic research because of the lack of prospects.

The scheme was announced as part of a package of measures in the White Paper. It sets out how the 7 % per annum average increase in the science budget over the next three years, announced in the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review, will be allocated to maintain the UK's world-class science. However, as departmental budgets have not yet been released, it may be too early to know whether the money announced for the science base represents new funding or largely a reshuffling of existing money.

The White Paper listed a number of ways in which the government was encouraging university employers, and funding and research councils, to develop career guidance and staff development for young postdocs on fixed-term contracts. It was also examining how it could do more to help women to progress in scientific careers and how it could increase the numbers of overseas students studying science and engineering in the UK. PhD stipends are to be increased in stages to reach £9,000 outside London by 2004. In an announcement made prior to the White Paper, this increase recognized the growing problem of attracting the best students to research, and went some way towards meeting the recommendations of the UKLSC Working Party.

The continued funding to improve facilities has been welcomed by all the leading science agencies. Notably, a further £1 billion investment in science infrastructure will be available between 2002 and

2004, funded by Government and the Wellcome Trust on top of the Joint Infrastructure Fund (JIF).

Familiar statistics were used to show that Britain's science base already competes very well, but the government is clearly worried about the future of science. It was argued that we need to maintain our world lead in the fields where we excel and develop a lead in new areas, while maintaining the capacity to do science that is recognizably world-class across the board. This was the rationale for providing an additional £250 million between 2002 and 2004 in the Spending Review for research in the areas of genomics, electronic science and informatics, and in basic technology such as nanotechnology, quantum computing and bioengineering.

The White Paper acknowledged that the government has a clear role in the funding of basic curiosity-driven research. The main thrust of the findings was to address how best to assist with the transfer of research from UK universities into commercial products and services in a way that has public support and involvement.

The Paper considered that although the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) did not penalize inter-disciplinary collaboration, more support was needed. It welcomed the guidelines for the next RAE that basic and strategic research done in confidence for business should be given equal weight alongside papers published in peer-reviewed journals. The RAE will not be used to divert research funds to support universities' applied work. Instead, a larger, permanent, stream of funding will replace the present Reach Out funding stream. The Higher Education Innovation Fund will be worth £140 million over three years. Other schemes to encourage collaboration with industry include funds to strengthen regional science and to create networks, which are to be made available through regional development agencies. Although this funding is welcomed, the UKLSC pointed out in an earlier consultation that much collaboration is carried out on a national or international scale rather than at a regional level.

The Paper also considered that it was necessary to start at the base, with better education for all children in science. It wants to beef up school labs, persuade 'science ambassadors' to encourage children – particularly girls – to take science more seriously and launch a 'science year' in September 2001. A new science curriculum, with greater emphasis on practical science, was implemented in September this year. The new £10,000 training and recruitment package for teachers intends to attract more well-qualified candidates. Several other initiatives were listed that would support continuing professional development of science teachers. The government also announced that it intended to work with the providers of science materials to schools to provide a single point of support for science teachers, so that all were aware of the resources available.

In the introductory chapter the need for public confidence in the whole notion of science to be strong and well founded was emphasized. The government saw its role in assuring consumers that risks have been properly assessed and controlled and in communicating those risks clearly and simply and at the right time. In that respect, guidelines on the use of scientific advice by government departments and agencies are to be updated and a new code of practice encouraging openness for advisory committees is to be published for consultation. However, similar guidelines and advisory committees were in place, for example, in the last two years when the public mistrust over GM foods grew, and the government was forced to draw back from its initial approach. Little was said about encouraging scientists to engage more effectively with the public other than that the government would build on existing Research Council initiatives in training scientists to communicate their work.

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