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Dierssen-BAW

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Get to Know Brain Awareness Week Partners

An Interview with Mara Dierssen, M.D., Ph.D., Centre for Genomic Regulation

March 2011

Mara Dierssen, M.D., Ph.D.

Group Leader, Genes and Disease Program

Centre for Genomic Regulation

Barcelona, Spain

Dana Foundation (DF): Last year, your Brain Awareness Week (BAW) programs reached approximately 3,000 people. What partnerships have you formed to facilitate a campaign of this scope?

Mara Dierssen (MD): Barcelona has been involved for almost 10 years in the World Brain Awareness Week with increasing levels of participation each year. This initiative has had increasing success over the years, reflecting the public and academic interest in brain research.

Our BAW campaign includes both school activities and events directed to the general public and specific audiences, such as teachers, parents, or patients associations. The increasing levels of participation by schools and the public and the fact that we organize a broad variety of events requires the involvement and coordination of different partners. First and foremost are our colleagues from different research centers and the many volunteers at the predoctoral and postdoctoral levels who go to the schools or welcome students in their laboratories. To be able to coordinate school activities, we have the support of the Municipal Institute of Education of Barcelona that takes care of reservations, contacts, and the schedule of activities. They also publicize the program to schools, which this year includes more than 32 activities (talks, open days, visits, and workshops).

Other long-term collaborations have been established with the Institute of Culture of Barcelona, which helps to find venues for the talks, publicizes the events on their Web site, and partially funds some of the activities. The network of public libraries also gets involved in the activities by providing venues and bringing science books to the events. We search for support from different agencies, including the Federation of European Neurosciences Societies, the Ministry of Innovation, and the Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology (FECYT). However, the funding is really not enough and we have to rely mainly in volunteers.

DF: How do you recruit fellow scientists to participate in BAW? Has their response been positive?

MD: This is usually based on personal contacts. Organizing events for the public requires a lot of planning work, including selecting topics and providing ideas and training. Everybody has a lot to do, and if you want scientists to get involved you have to make the process easy for them. This means facilitating contacts with schools, ensuring the publicity of activities, etc.

We have long-term collaborations with many researchers, who enthusiastically volunteer for activities. New people also get involved every year. Of course not everybody can participate each year, but, in general, scientists are very enthusiastic and collaborative.

DF: You help coordinate events for the public ranging from lectures to music concerts. How are topics selected?

MD: It is different for the school program than for the general public activities. In the schools there are normally talks on topics that are

of interest to a young audience (drugs, sex and the brain, how the brain learns, sensorimotor integration in sports, etc), usually proposed by the schools. However there are also hands-on workshops, lab visits, and short talks explaining how neuroscience research is done, who the neuroscientists are, and how students can become neuroscientists. In general, the scientist giving the talk or receiving the visit proposes a topic or shows his/her own research. Sometimes a scientist asks us for ideas and advice. We have created a library of general presentations and other materials that are available for the scientists.

The number of participating schools has increased each year. Teachers are asking for more support from scientists and are including visits to labs as part of their classes. More and more kids are independently asking scientists for visits or choosing neuroscience topics for their school project.

Regarding the general public, we select topics that are of widespread interest, such as neuroscience and the law, neuroscience and the arts, politics, magic, etc. Topics for discussion may be based on current news stories. For example, one of this year's neuroscience cafes will address the proposed law of having separate education for boys and girls. For the Brain Fair, we select topics that can be easily absorbed by the public so that they can really see and be amazed by the facts behind the experience. The idea is to explain a very clear scientific message, so that people can enjoy the beauty of brain science. We distribute a questionnaire at our events to gauge the response of the public and the participating scientists.

DF: Has the media been helpful to get the word out about BAW?

MD: This is the weaker point. We do not have the interest of the media. Media coverage is quite variable, and depends on uncontrollable things, like if a more popular event, like a football match, is happening. Moreover, the media is not helpful in announcing events. You have to pay for publicity, except from a couple of magazines. This is really a shame.

DF: You've been an active BAW partner for almost ten years. How has interest in the campaign changed over that time?

MD: As I have explained for the schools, in the case of the general public we have observed a steady increase of participation in the activities, with more and more people attending the events each year. This is important because cultural offerings are also exponentially increasing each year, and so we have more and more competition!