



Tales from the water cooler

Barrie Cadshaw reveals the movers and shakers in public engagement

Mover

After six years managing National Science and Engineering Week and the British Science Association's regions and branches, Joanna Rooke is leaving the Association to be the coordinator of the Thomas Young Research Centre at UCL.

Remembering sexism

In the last issue, I reported that the public engagement community was rocked by the departure of Susan Greenfield from the Royal Institution. Since then there has been a Special General Meeting (in early April) at which Susan's supporters were thwarted in their attempt to reinstate her as director by 512 votes to 121. In his coverage of the Special General Meeting, London Evening Standard science and technology Editor Mark Prigg quotes one RI member as saying the vote was a 'triumph of the grey hairs over the mini-skirts'. Some readers will wonder whether, with comments like that, it is any surprise that Susan brought a sex discrimination claim against her former employer. The case has since been dropped as part of an out of court settlement.

Singh for victory

Some of the hot news stories discussed in the last issue of *People & Science* have subsequently been resolved. The British Chiropractic Association (BCA) has dropped its libel action against the science writer

Simon Singh, having filed a notice of discontinuation in the High Court. The case had become something of a cause célèbre in the blogosphere and elsewhere, with professions as diverse as scientists, comedians and freedom of speech campaigners all lining up to offer their support to Simon. On the news that the case against him had been dropped, Simon said: 'My victory does not mean that our libel laws are okay, because I won despite the libel laws – we still have the most notoriously anti-free speech libel laws in the free world.'

In a press release announcing they were dropping its case, the BCA made a statement which looks like becoming a classic of science 'communication': 'More media information from Carl Courtney on 07785 397321 but no new information will be given.'

Climategate

We have also seen another development in 'Climategate', with UEA's climate researchers being cleared of any deliberate malpractice by the second of three inquiries into their conduct.

On air

The last few months have seen a veritable explosion of physicists taking part in major mainstream TV and radio programming. On Valentine's day Jim Al-Khalili took part in Radio 4's Desert Island Discs, demonstrating what could be called a varied musical taste as he chose to be cast away with a mix of sounds ranging from Santana to Rolf Harris.

In March, Brian Cox appeared on the Jonathan Ross chat show. He walked on set to screams and wolf whistles. This is not the reaction you'd necessarily expect a particle physicist to elicit! What followed was a discussion about Brian's area of expertise – the Large Hadron Collider – or, as it had been called in a huge typo that had appeared on the *Telegraph's* website several days earlier, the Large Hardon Collider. Jonathan Ross had made his own version of the LHC, which he called Mini Hadron, out of household items – predominantly of the adult variety. When the chat show host asked Brian if he wanted to take any of the scaled down model home with him, Brian immediately pocketed Mini Hadron's transparent vibrating centrepiece. This spawned the following reaction from Jim Al-Khalili on Twitter: 'Brian Absolutely brill on @Wossy. Science arrives in popular culture 51 years after C.P. Snow – and with butt plugs too! Good man.' You really couldn't make it up!

The Natural History Museum's researchers and curators have also been enjoying the spotlight in the BBC's part series 'The Museum of Life'. My sources tell me that the fish curator regards it as something of an occupational hazard to be filmed bulbously through a fish-eye lens. But why then, he wonders, were we not treated to a prismatic mosaic of the beetle curator?

Do get in touch if you hear any tales at the water cooler that you'd like us to include in the next edition of *People & Science*.



Barrie Cadshaw is at the British Science Association
barrie.cadshaw@britishscienceassociation.org