



Tales from the water cooler

Barrie Cadshaw reveals the movers and shakers in public engagement

Movers...

The biggest move, that has shaken the public engagement community to its core, was the departure of Susan Greenfield from the Royal Institution. The ensuing dialogue in the nationals and online forums came up with various theories about her downfall. She was a feminist victim of old farts; she overreached herself with the RI renovation, resulting in a £3-million debt; she issued dire warnings that computers were bad for children's brains and bodies, without doing the scientific work to back them up with evidence. She was certainly like Marmite. Love her or loathe her, she has been a powerful influence in the science popularisation community. She should be praised for her initiative in founding the Science Media Centre. It has persuaded many of her formerly-reticent colleagues to go on the record, and has strengthened the accuracy of science reporting.

Amy Lothian, from the Institute of Physics, has replaced Nigel Eady as Science in Society Officer at the British Science Association.

EngineeringUK, formerly the ETB, has appointed Beth Elgood as their Director of Communications.

Pat Kieran, Chair of the Caithness branch of the British Science Association, was recently awarded an MBE for services to promoting science.

and shakers

Insight

After the General Medical Council found that Dr Andrew Wakefield acted 'dishonestly and irresponsibly' in the way he carried out his controversial research purporting to link the MMR vaccine to autism, the media's role in the MMR scare inevitably came under the spotlight. Ben Goldacre, writing in the Guardian, said the media had developed no insight into their own role. My impression is that the MMR scandal prompted a lot of media introspection, and that reporting the relative strengths of an argument, rather than presenting opposing views as if they were equally balanced, has become something of a mantra for science journalists. Perhaps the important distinction is between science journalists and generalists reporting science. So – good timing for the recent report, *Science and the Media*,¹ to recommend that the principles of science reporting be included in journalism training.

Around 200 Medical Research Council staff are due to relocate, joining the other Research Councils in Swindon at the end of this year. The Wellcome Trust's e-lert SPIN reported that 'up to 90 remaining staff in strategy, policy and management will move to new offices in London to help maintain strategic collaborations.' Barrie hopes the catering staff will accompany the MRC to its new London location. Their biscuits are the best in town.

Misplaced

Working out where you are can be tricky. Conservative MP for Esher and Walton, Ian Taylor, didn't seem to know where he was at an event in January to launch the fifty-day countdown to the Big Bang Fair (a three-day science and engineering event in for schools during National Science & Engineering Week). Minister for Science and Technology from 1994-97, Taylor has followed his interest in science with a variety of positions on science-related Commons committees. He may well shine on those, but in January he failed to recall what the event was for, and waxed lyrical about how engineers are not geeks. He is retiring at the end of this parliamentary term.

¹ <http://www.bis.gov.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2010/01/Science-and-the-Media-Securing-Future.pdf>

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*.



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