

Letter from the President, on the occasion of the 10th Birthday of FENS

In a couple of weeks, the European neuroscience community will meet at the FENS Forum in Geneva (12-16 July). 2008 also marks the anniversary of the creation of FENS; the first Forum was held in Berlin in 1998. It is a suitable moment to reflect on where we are, what we are doing, and where we are going.

FENS is a Federation. It is federation of national societies and of monodisciplinary societies from right across the continent, including the oldest neuroscience society in the world - the European Brain and Behaviour Society - which is this year celebrating its 40th anniversary. FENS estimates that there are in the region of 17,000 members of the constituent societies, and we endeavour to represent and develop their diverse interests as well as we can. At the core, is our desire to provide a platform for displaying the evident strengths of European neuroscience. We also want to ensure that these are recognized in comparison with other sciences - in Brussels and elsewhere.

The Forum

The Forum is the primary vehicle for presenting science. Under the leadership of Eckhart Gundelfinger, the current Programme Committee has worked hard to create a balanced, topical and excellent set of Plenary Lectures and Symposia, supported by an array of Special Lectures (many of which are prize lectures) and by the daily poster sessions. With over 5100 people attending and 3800 posters, the Forum is on a scale that is large enough to meet the aspirations of most neuroscience sub-cultures, but not so large as to be oppressive. Additional events include symposia to do with European grant schemes (such as the highly successful European Research Council) or with public understanding and engagement (organized by the European Dana Alliance for the Brain). In short - there is something for everyone - and I particularly urge as many as possible to spend time at the posters and in the Forum's trade exhibition.

Governance

FENS has a simple governance structure consisting of one representative (usually the President) of each full-member of the federation. Each person has one vote without regard to the size of the

country or society. The larger nations may sometimes appear to have more influence on activities but, with respect to decision-making, they have the same single vote as smaller nations. That is as it should be. With the 10th anniversary approaching, we have nonetheless recognized the need to bring aspects of our Articles and Regulations up to date. Dominique Poulain, the new Executive Director of FENS, has taken on this task and the Governing Council will be deliberating his carefully thought out proposals shortly.

Schools Programme

The strengths of European neuroscience depend, in large part, upon our diverse University and Research Institute structure. This has given us an opportunity to develop a new network - NENS - in which the organizers of different Masters and Ph.D courses can get together to learn about the strengths and pitfalls of various approaches to graduate education in the neurosciences. The circumstances of different countries are often very different, but the ambitions of young scientists are universal - to learn from the best. The NENS forum, under the leadership of Denise Manahan-Vaughan, has already met several times and is developing ideas about fostering a more uniform, high-standard of postgraduate training in the neurosciences across Europe.

FENS organizes a varied diet of well-respected summer and winter schools. The year 2007 saw a record number of 8 courses, overseen by a joint Committee with IBRO called PENS under Susan Sara as the chair. This new Programme of European Neuroscience Schools (PENS) has successfully put a great deal of energy into developing this important aspect of our joint activities. FENS also supports two semi-permanent training centres affiliated to major Research Universities (in Lausanne and in Bordeaux) and these have run hands-on schools that the students privileged to be selected for rave about. We like to think that this experience could be feeding directly back into their research efforts straightaway.

At the start of my Presidency, I had hoped that FENS might put together a permanent training centre in the Mediterranean, perhaps in partnership with another major scientific federation. The idea was for this to become a place where short or longer courses could be held round the year and to which international grant teams might go to discuss ongoing projects. There were enough of these happening to make such a venture viable. Sadly, the more we thought it out, the more

we saw risks - and the finances for success were just beyond our reach. Some also wondered whether the concept of a 'permanent' location for such a venture was really consonant with the FENS spirit. I saw these concerns and drew back, but I keep wondering why Europe doesn't have its own 'Woods Hole' or 'Cold Spring Harbour'. These are laboratories in their own right, but also places that see training young scientists as central to their mission, supported by NIH and other funders. They are places in which successive generations of young North American neuroscientists have met others and formed scientific friendships beyond the bounds of their own Universities. We need something like this and I hope a future President may yet re-visit the idea.

The Executive Committee

My Presidency has been strongly supported by a very able team in Asla Pitkänen, Alois Saria and Helmut Kettenmann in their various roles, supported by excellent offices in Berlin and Bordeaux. Our finances are sound, and our collective sense is that FENS is respected in various important quarters as the 'voice' of European neuroscience. We are active members of the European Brain Council, led by the neurologist Jes Olesen, which has so effectively campaigned in Brussels on behalf of the need for more research aimed at the unmet health needs of neurological and psychiatric research. This is occasionally something of an uphill struggle, but we feel it is worth it.

The European Journal of Neuroscience

Last but not least - indeed the foundation of everything else that we do - is the European Journal of Neuroscience (EJN). It is a great journal that publishes fine work right across the board. The most recent figures show around 400 'downloads' of the leading papers in each issue, with the most popular paper being as likely to be developmental neurobiology, as electrophysiology or behavioural neuroscience. The income we derive from our joint ownership of EJN (with Wiley-Blackwell) is the financial mainspring of many of our activities. The journal has thrived under the fine editorial leadership of Barry Everitt and Chris Henderson. As they now stand down after many years, and we welcome new editors, I salute them and their office team for running a fine journal and indirectly making such a key contribution to FENS activities.

It is vital that we all support EJM. I have submitted two manuscripts lately - one accepted and one rejected! So there is no 'inside-track' and standards are certainly being maintained! All of us recognize that there are two or three highly prominent general science journals to which we may prefer to submit our best work. The acceptance rate in these outlets is very tough, some would say capricious. Given this, if all of us - and I mean ALL of us - were to consider EJM as the next port-of-call for our best work, we would be taking the best step we could to guarantee our future and the collective standing of European neuroscience. Noticing and citing relevant good work already published in EJM would also be really beneficial. I urge everyone to tie a knot in their handkerchiefs and not untie it until you have sent a really good manuscript to EJM.

Welcome and safe journey

I look forward to seeing you in Geneva. Ann Kato and the local organizing committee have worked hard to achieve what promises to be a well organised meeting and they have prepared a superb social programme to accompany the science. Let's go there to work hard, play hard and have a great mid-summer week.

Richard Morris

25 June 2008