

Public Awareness for Brain Research : the Swiss experience

Béatrice Roth, Ph.D. and Pierre J. Magistretti, M.D., Ph.D.

SUMMARY

A critical development towards public awareness activities related to brain research in Switzerland has been the organisation of a yearly Brain Awareness Week.

Brain Awareness Week is a public information campaign initiated in 1996 in the United States by the Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives to focus public attention on the importance of the brain and brain research. It is an effort to bridge the gap between scientific advances and the public understanding of their implication for society. The main purpose of the Dana Alliance is to inform and advance education about brain research. The Dana Alliance is supported by the Charles A. Dana foundation, a private, non-profit philanthropic organisation with particular interests in neuroscience and education.

Brain Awareness Week took place from March 13 – 19 2000 in several European countries, in the United States, Canada, China, Georgia, India, Kenya, Nepal, Pakistan, Russia, South Africa and Venezuela. In Switzerland it was held under the auspices of the Swiss Society for Neuroscience and the European Dana Alliance for the Brain and under the high patronage of Mr. Charles Kleiber, Secretary of State for science and technology.

KEY-WORDS: Brain, Education, public awareness, research, neuroscience

RESUME

La “Semaine du Cerveau” est une campagne d’information pour le grand public sur l’importance de la recherche sur le cerveau et sur les progrès récents dans ce domaine.

Cette campagne a été lancée en 1996 aux Etats-Unis par la “ Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives ”. Le principal but de la Dana Alliance est d’informer et de favoriser l’éducation concernant la recherche sur le cerveau. La Dana alliance est soutenue par la fondation Charles A. Dana, une organisation philanthropique à but non lucratif active dans les domaines de l’éducation et des neurosciences.

La Semaine du Cerveau s’est déroulée du 13 au 19 mars 2000 dans différents pays européens ainsi que dans les pays suivants: Etats-Unis, Canada, Chine, Géorgie, Inde, Kenya, Népal, Pakistan, Russie, Afrique du Sud et Venezuela. En Suisse elle s’est déroulée pour la troisième fois sous les auspices de la Société Suisse de Neuroscience et de la European Dana Alliance for the Brain et sous le haut patronage de Charles Kleiber, Secrétaire d’Etat à la science et à la recherche.

MOTS CLES : Cerveau, éducation, recherche, neuroscience, information

Adresse des auteurs :

Institut de Physiologie, Université de Lausanne, Rue du Bugnon 7, Case postale 1000 Lausanne 4

E-mail : dana1997@iphysiol.unil.ch

E-mail : Pierre.Magistretti@iphysiol.unil.ch

Introduction

Since 1951 the two goals of the Dana Foundation are Health and Education. The founder, Charles A. Dana, a New York state legislator and philanthropist recognised the importance of the role of educating people in order to make them responsible citizens. The Dana Foundation has pursued this goal and in 1996 with the help of basic and clinical neuroscientists, (one of them is the Nobel laureate James Watson) created the Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives to raise the public awareness on the importance of brain research. The public information campaign launched that same year in the United States was called “Brain Awareness Week”. In 1997 the European Dana Alliance was created with the same goals as its sister organisation in the US.

Raising public Awareness: organisation

The main programme to raise public awareness is the organisation of a **Brain Awareness Week**, a public information campaign, which is now taking place in numerous countries all over the world. Each year clinicians, basic neuroscientists, patient advocacy groups, universities organise numerous events to inform the general public and decision makers about the importance of brain research.

Brain Awareness Week has proven to be an efficient way of spreading knowledge about the brain as we can recall from our three years experience in Switzerland. As shown in the diagram (next page), the information is spread on several levels:

1. Prior to the event journalists have been informed through a national press conference, held 2-3 weeks before Brain Awareness Week (the first two years). This year there was a press release informing about individual press conferences to be held in the different cities. These press conferences informed about the events taking place locally, which permitted a large coverage in the local newspapers and local radio stations.
2. Programs and posters for each city were printed in the relevant language (French, German or Italian).
3. The organising committees of each city were composed mainly of members of the Swiss Society of Neuroscience and were responsible for the local organisation of events.

This global approach has lead to the following results:

- The information to the media generated more than 300 press cuttings in 1999.
- The entire programs were featured in the local press.
- Local and national radio and television programs broadcast numerous interviews of neuroscientists and clinicians as well as special programs related to the topics debated during the week.

Due to this effort the general public was extremely aware of what was going on during Brain Awareness Week and hence participated extremely well : in Zurich more than 40'000 persons visited the Brain Fair, which accounts for 4% of the population of Zurich and vicinity! In Bern almost the same proportion was reached with 17'000 people attending the exhibit which has taken place in the display windows of the department store Loeb.

