

Taking science to a wider audience at NIEHS

By Suchandra Bhattacharjee

Lectures on scientific research and discoveries, which can cover subjects from epidemiology to sequencing DNA, can be difficult for a general audience to understand. At NIEHS, the nonscientific workforce is an invaluable part of the research process, and individual staff members often have an enormous curiosity about science.

The new internal NIEHS series, Big Picture, Small Talk, grew out of a desire to present scientific information to nonscientific staff. Abee Boyles, Ph.D., health scientist with the National Toxicology Program, leads a committee organizing the new series.

Opening the first talk Oct. 1, Boyles asked, “Do you want to learn how science at NIEHS supports our mission to discover how the environment affects people in order to promote healthy lives? Do you know how your day-to-day work supports the mission?”

John Schelp, from the NIEHS Office of Science Education and Diversity, followed with a presentation, “NIEHS Overview and Research Highlights.” He pointed out the importance of the National Institutes of Health, the NIEHS reporting agency, which supports a staggering 90 percent of medical and biomedical research in the U.S. Schelp also highlighted the role of NIEHS in the development of Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, and how the institute supports environmental studies to shed further light on its slogan, “Your Environment. Your Health.”

Grass roots and cross-divisional

The grassroots initiative for the program had cross-divisional inspiration. The idea was first suggested during a 2013 NIEHS Leadership Development program, with further development at the March flash mentoring session (see [story](#)). During these events, staff in the NIEHS Office of Management expressed a desire to better understand the science they support by their work.

NIEHS scientists have found few avenues to present their work to the nonscientific community at NIEHS. Presentations to the general public often take place outside the institute. The committee hopes to encourage scientific staff to hone their communication skills by presenting research from a big picture perspective, and by participating in talks outside of their area of research.

The series aims to broaden the audience for internal scientific talks, and include interactive formats to help bolster networking between scientific and nonscientific staff, and across divisions. The series name, “Big Picture, Small Talk,” was coined by Gary Bird, Ph.D., staff scientist in the NIEHS Calcium Regulation Group. The organizing committee, headed by Boyles and including personnel from all divisions in the institute, is actively working to line up speakers for the series.

(Suchandra Bhattacharjee, Ph.D., is a special volunteer in the NIEHS Free Radical Metabolism Group.)



“One of the inspirations [of the series] was a staff member in the Office of Acquisitions who wanted to understand more about the science behind the things she was being asked to buy,” said Boyles. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Schelp’s overview was packed with fascinating tidbits of NIEHS history and growth, followed by a lively discussion among participants. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

Upcoming Big Picture, Small Talk

Environmental Accidents: What Role Is NIEHS Playing?

Tuesday, Nov. 18, 2:00 p.m.

Building 101, Executive Conference Room

Richard Kwok, Ph.D., Epidemiology Branch

Scott Auerbach, Ph.D., Biomolecular Screening Branch

How Therapeutic Drugs and Nasty Chemicals Move Around Your Body

Wednesday, Dec. 3, 2:30 p.m.

Building 101, F193

David Miller, Ph.D., Signal Transduction Laboratory

Planned for 2015

The Environment and the Brain: Alzheimer Disease, Autism, Addiction, etc.

Jerry Yakel, Ph.D., Neurobiology Laboratory

What Is Fracking? Why Is It Always in the News?

Aubrey Miller, M.D., Office of the Director

Animal Research at NIEHS

Terry Blankenship-Paris, D.V.M., Comparative Medicine Branch

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