

An interview with Alex Joyner and Liz Robertson: *Development* editors at the helm of developmental biology societies

Development editors Liz Robertson (Professor of Developmental Biology at the Sir William Dunn School of Pathology in Oxford) and Alexandra Joyner (Courtney Steel Chair in Pediatric Cancer Research and Professor in the Department of Developmental Biology at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York) are not only actively involved in research and editorial work but, as of this summer, they will both be in charge of national developmental biology societies. Liz is Chair of the British Society for Developmental Biology (BSDB), and in August 2010, Alex will become President of the Society for Developmental Biology (SDB) in North America. We caught up with both of them at the annual BSDB Spring meeting that took place at the University of Warwick in April 2010.

Liz, you're currently Chair of the British Society for Developmental Biology (BSDB). How long have you held this position?

Liz: Only for the last six months. I took over the reins when Matt Freeman stepped down last autumn. Matt had a very big job during his tenure as the BSDB Chair because the Society was fortunate to host the 2009 ISDB [International Society for Developmental Biology] conference in Edinburgh. This is the major event in the developmental biologists' calendar as it's only held every 4 years. The ISDB attracts around 1300 delegates and it's a very challenging and time-consuming task to organize a meeting of this size.



Liz Robertson

Alex, when do you start as President of the Society for Developmental Biology?

Alex: I'll take up the position of SDB President after our yearly meeting this August.

For how long does the Chair or President occupy their position in these different developmental biology societies?

Liz: All of the officers of the BSDB, which includes the Chair, the Secretary, the Treasurer and the Meetings Officer, hold office for five years.

Alex: At the SDB, the President's position is just one year, as the main responsibility of the President is to organize the annual meeting. However, the President makes a three-year commitment because they are President-Elect for one year before being President and Past President the year after being President. There are also representatives for seven regions in the United States, a Canada representative and one junior faculty representative. These are all three-year positions, with the possibility for re-election once.

What is the role of the British and the North American societies for developmental biology in their respective geographic regions?

Liz: The primary goal of the BSDB is to bring together developmental biologists in the UK and Europe through networking activities. We have two yearly meetings: the spring meeting, which we're at at the moment, is the largest meeting and is usually jointly held with the British Society for Cell Biology. We also have an autumn workshop, which is at a smaller venue and on a more focused topic. We also join with other developmental biology societies to

organize meetings. For example, in 2011 we're holding a meeting with the French Society for Developmental Biology in Nice.



Alex Joyner

Alex: The SDB holds an annual meeting each summer attended by developmental biologists from North America, as well as the rest of the world, and all the local regions also have a smaller meeting in the spring or the fall. The regional meetings are focused on giving an opportunity for junior faculty and students and post-docs to give talks, whereas at the larger annual meeting, the main talks are often given by more-established scientists. In addition, the SDB spearheads a number of educational initiatives throughout the year and during the SDB meeting. For example, we have a bi-yearly course, called boot camp, for new investigators to help them get their lab up and running and make them aware of the promotion process. In the alternate year, we have a reboot camp for senior faculty to reinvigorate their research and teaching approaches. There are also workshops for postdoctoral fellows and students.

Liz: We also aim to have an educational component within the BSDB. It takes a couple of forms: first, at this meeting there

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are two workshops scheduled during the lunch breaks that aim to provide help and careers advice for our junior colleagues. Second, owing to a very generous block grant from The Company of Biologists [the publishers of *Development*] we're also able to award a lot of travel grants to students who are BSDB members, which facilitates their ability to attend this meeting as well as international meetings. Our goal is to underwrite their costs so that they can get out there, network and meet people from other countries and working in other disciplines.

Alex: Similarly, the SDB receives money from the journal *Developmental Biology*, which is used for a variety of initiatives, including student travel and support for meetings that have a developmental biology component to them. In such cases, we encourage the organizers to use the funds for travel for young people and to have an even gender balance.

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How do you see the future of your societies in their respective communities?

Alex: We have about 2500 members and the membership is still growing slowly. Although the areas of evo-devo and eco-devo are still growing, one of the questions we are facing is whether the SDB in North America will shrink because some of our potential members will join stem cell societies. A chunk of the people who used to go to the SDB meetings have likely been taken away because they're going to the stem cell meetings. We're trying to figure out ways to attract stem cell biologists that have a strong developmental biology component to their research. We feel this is an area where developmental biology can have a major impact, as determining how to direct stem cells to differentiate into particular cell types likely will involve mimicking the normal developmental processes that we are all studying.

Liz: [In the UK] we've been in a fairly steady state. We haven't seen any evidence that people aren't renewing their memberships, for example, so it's still a very popular society from that point of view, but I agree with Alex: within the UK even,

the British Stem Cell Network is actually a much larger group, I suspect, than the BSDB, despite the fact that we've been around for many decades. But as you'll see at all the developmental biology meetings, there's always at least one session that has a lot of stem cell biology and/or genomics and bioinformatics. Again, I think it's important to attract students and post-docs working in these areas to come and participate in our meeting, hear great talks and see the excellent developmental biology posters and get ideas about how their work relates to fundamental issues in developmental biology.

Is there anything that your societies can learn from each other, or is there anything that you admire in the other society that you wish yours had?

Liz: Well, I wish I had Alex's budget, but I think we have to be realistic: We have a membership of about one thousand people in our society. We can't afford to employ professional staff to help run the society, for example. It's run by a team of senior officers who do the bulk of the work behind the scenes. Our Secretary Mike Taylor and Treasurer Andy Fleming still collect payments and send out emails and do a lot of the day-to-day administration themselves. I'm sure we'd love to be able to have somebody working for us but in order to keep the membership costs down it's definitely a hands-on activity at the BSDB. Luckily, our committee members are always happy to volunteer their time and share out the various tasks.

Alex: I'm glad I'm President of the SDB because Ida Chow [the Executive Officer of the SDB] has been keeping the SDB running beautifully for many years. We're also fortunate to have additional funding from Wiley-Blackwell to start a new project: an educational website (WIREs-dev biol) that will provide short descriptions written by experts on a wide variety of topics in developmental biology. The site is meant as a resource for people in the field and for professors or high school teachers to use for teaching. To me, however, the current thrust of mouse developmental biology was born in Britain and there is a strong tradition of all types of developmental biology in the UK. Many senior developmental biologists in the US either were trained here or were influenced directly, or indirectly, by all the exciting work that was going on [in the UK] twenty or thirty years ago. From that point of view, we're always looking at what's going on in Britain.

You're saying that the US will never have the history that the UK has because they can't obtain that, and the UK can never have the same number of people because there just aren't as many people?

Liz: Yes. It's the difference in the size of the institutions. Even a large university like Oxford or Cambridge is still quite small compared with places like Stanford, the University of California or the big institutions in the New York and Boston areas. It's a much smaller community here in the UK. That has its advantages and its disadvantages, I think.

Are there any plans for a future collaboration between the BSDB and the SDB?

Liz: This is a sore point actually, because when Alex was elected as the President-Elect of the SDB she asked me whether we could do something together. Unfortunately, it turned out that because the BSDB is very efficient at forward planning, James Briscoe, our Meetings Secretary, had already put in place a number of other joint meetings and that has precluded an interaction during Alex's term of office at the SDB. I think it would be great if we could do at least one thing jointly together in the future.

The SDB was very enthusiastic about the idea of a joint meeting with the BSDB

Alex: Yes, the SDB was very enthusiastic about the idea of a joint meeting with the BSDB, so I hope that we can book one for the next available year, and hopefully the next incoming President would be happy to do that. It's too bad that I won't be involved. Nevertheless, our societies have had long-standing collaborations. For example, the Best Student Poster winner from each society is sent to the other society's annual meeting and the expenses are shared.

Liz, this is your first spring BSDB meeting as the Chair. Is that entirely different to just attending it?

Oh, yes, absolutely. I don't know what's more stressful, coming here to give a talk or coming here not knowing exactly what extra things might pop up that you weren't prepared for, like finding volunteers to help judge the posters. It's been a lot of fun but a

very busy three days, I have to say. As long as the ceilidh band turns out all right this evening we can then breathe a big sigh of relief.

Alex, how have you found the conference so far?

It's great. I'm really enjoying it.

Does it give you any ideas for the SDB conference in August?

Alex: I've been looking at speakers and subjects because the main job that I have next year is to plan the meeting, the schedule and everything. I don't know whether you have to do that every year Liz?

Liz: No, fortunately, we nominate two members of the committee to act as the organisers of a given meeting. They share the burden of coming up with a programme and inviting all the speakers, so it's very much their prerogative to shape the meeting. The two organisers of this meeting, Kate [Lewis] and Josh [Brickman], were very organised and [Meeting Secretary] James Briscoe has done a fantastic job behind the scenes, so it has all gone very smoothly. Being the Chair has been so much fun because my colleagues have done all the work, so I've just come along and enjoyed myself and presented the medals. I guess the

presidency of the SDB is quite a daunting prospect from that point of view, if you've got to put together a four-day meeting.

Alex: Yes, but I'll have advisory groups to help me.

Liz, do you have any advice for Alex for when she takes up her presidency position?

Liz: You just have to be prepared and Alex is very good at standing up and being spontaneous. That's what you have to do if you're called upon two minutes before the meeting starts, [and someone asks] 'Liz, will you do the introductions?'

How long have you both been editors of *Development* and how did that come about?

Liz: I was invited to join the journal in the early part of the decade by Jim Smith, who was [the new] Editor in Chief at the time, so I've been doing it very happily for the past eight years.

Alex: I've been an editor of *Development* for just about three years. Jim invited me when Andrew Lumsden stepped down, so as to have an editor who could handle papers on vertebrate neural development.

What do you feel *Development's* role and place is in your respective developmental biology communities?

Liz: *Development* occupies a very important position in our field. As it's based in the UK and run by the Company of Biologists, the UK community very much views it as our flagship journal. What everyone appreciates are the very high standards *Development* sets. The quality of the figures is always exceptional, the journal's visual style and layout always appeals and, of course, it doesn't cost any of our hard earned grant money to publish papers! The *Development* website is also a big draw, as it's easy to navigate and provides lots of useful information and downloads.

Alex: *Development* is very important to the general developmental biology community because it is one of our pre-eminent journals. It is, therefore, widely read, and students and post-docs strive to publish their work in it. I think authors also appreciate that the editors are academics and therefore strive to make decisions purely on the basis of the quality and impact of the research.

Thanks for taking the time for this interview.