

An interview with Margaret Buckingham: President of the French Society of Developmental Biology

Margaret Buckingham is Professor in the Department of Developmental Biology at the Pasteur Institute in Paris and she is also the current President of the French Society of Developmental Biology (Société Française de Biologie du Développement, SFBF). We spoke with her about the role of the SFBF and about ongoing changes in the French research system.



What is your laboratory currently working on?

We work on skeletal myogenesis and cardiogenesis. The skeletal myogenesis research involves studying gene regulatory networks that govern cell fate choices and the entry into the myogenic programme in the embryo, as well as satellite cell behaviour during muscle regeneration in the adult. For cardiogenesis, work involves examining the second heart field and lineages that contribute to different parts of the heart. We're also interested in cardiac morphogenesis, and how the chambers of the heart are shaped as development proceeds.

How long have you been President of the SFBF?

I've been President since 2006; the term is for 3 years, renewable once, so that after 6 years somebody else should take over.

How old is the society?

There was originally a much older society in France called the Société de Biologie, that was founded in the 19th century and still

continues today. The actual French developmental biology society was set up in the 1980s.

What does the SFBF do for its members?

One of our main activities is the annual meeting, which is very important and which brings together all of the developmental biology community in France. We very often hold that annual meeting as a joint meeting with another developmental biology society. For example, next year our annual meeting will be in Nice with the British Society for Developmental Biology, this year it was in Paris with the Japanese society, last year it was in Toulouse with the Spanish society. So this is tradition.

We also have smaller meetings like one with the French Genetics Society on microRNAs in plant and animal development in December 2010.

Why do you collaborate with so many other countries? What do you hope to get out of bringing them to France?

I think that to have a bilateral meeting each year establishes possibilities for collaborative contacts and widens the horizons of our members.

How many members does the SFBF have?

The number of people who paid a subscription this year is 225, but the number of people who come to meetings is considerably more than that. I would say the size of the community, including tenured scientists, postdocs and students, is probably around 750.

You did your DPhil at Oxford – what made you decide to move to France after that, and then stay there?

Well, that was quite a long time ago. I moved to France in the early seventies, when the impact of Jacob and Monod's work on messenger RNA was still very high profile, and people in the Pasteur [Institute] were just moving from working on bacterial

systems to eukaryotic systems. I joined the group of François Gros, who had been involved in the messenger RNA story, and we began to work on skeletal muscle as a model system. At that time, it was a very nice model system because the cells would differentiate on a Petri dish. As the techniques improved, it became possible to move in vivo, which we did as rapidly as we could. But it wasn't really until the beginning of the eighties that it became possible to look at what was going on in the embryo.

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So, you moved to France because at that time the research environment in biology was very advanced there.

What is the situation in France today?

You asked me why I stayed in France. In the eighties, it was a very good place to be as a young researcher, with many possibilities for setting up one's own group and for doing what one wanted. At that time the situation in Britain was less favourable.

As far as the situation now is concerned, I would say that French science has suffered from being stuck in a rigid system with many people in permanent positions and not enough money to finance research. Now there are signs that the system is beginning to become more supple, and from the French perspective that is certainly good. There's now a national research agency [l'Agence Nationale de la Recherche], independent of the big state organizations – the CNRS and Inserm – and this national research agency gives out grants with money for temporary salaries, among other things, which introduces much needed flexibility. Of course within Europe things have changed too, with the new European

Interview by Eva Amsen*

Online Editor, *Development*

*Author for correspondence (e.amsen@biologists.com)

Research Council, for example, which is also very positive. In the longer run, I hope these initiatives will continue to expand.

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In France now, if you're a young person and you're good, you have a chance of setting up your own group and getting financed. This said, the situation is very competitive, and the problem is that there is still not a good structure to permit people to have rolling salaries, for example. So really,

young people who want to continue in science in France depend on having a permanent position in the CNRS or Inserm, or in the university, and that is still complicated.

Does the SFBD do anything to support young scientists who are just starting their career?

Yes. I told you that one of our main activities is running an annual meeting, but we also give out fellowships to young developmental biologists in France. Because we unfortunately don't have enough money to do more, those are mainly travel fellowships, provided to fund people to attend developmental biology meetings in Europe or in the US, Japan, etc. We also hope that we'll be able to finance a number of young French people to go to the next

meeting of the International Society for Developmental Biology, which will be held in Mexico in 2013.

What do you see the SFBD doing in the next few years?

Obviously we want to continue doing what we're doing. I think that, like everyone, we're becoming much more web-based now, so we're setting up a new website and we hope that it will become a really interactive forum that young French developmental biologists will be able to use to communicate with each other and to learn about what's going on. The website will also facilitate labs registering their students as SFBD members as they enter the lab. It also interfaces with the site of the International Society of Developmental Biology.