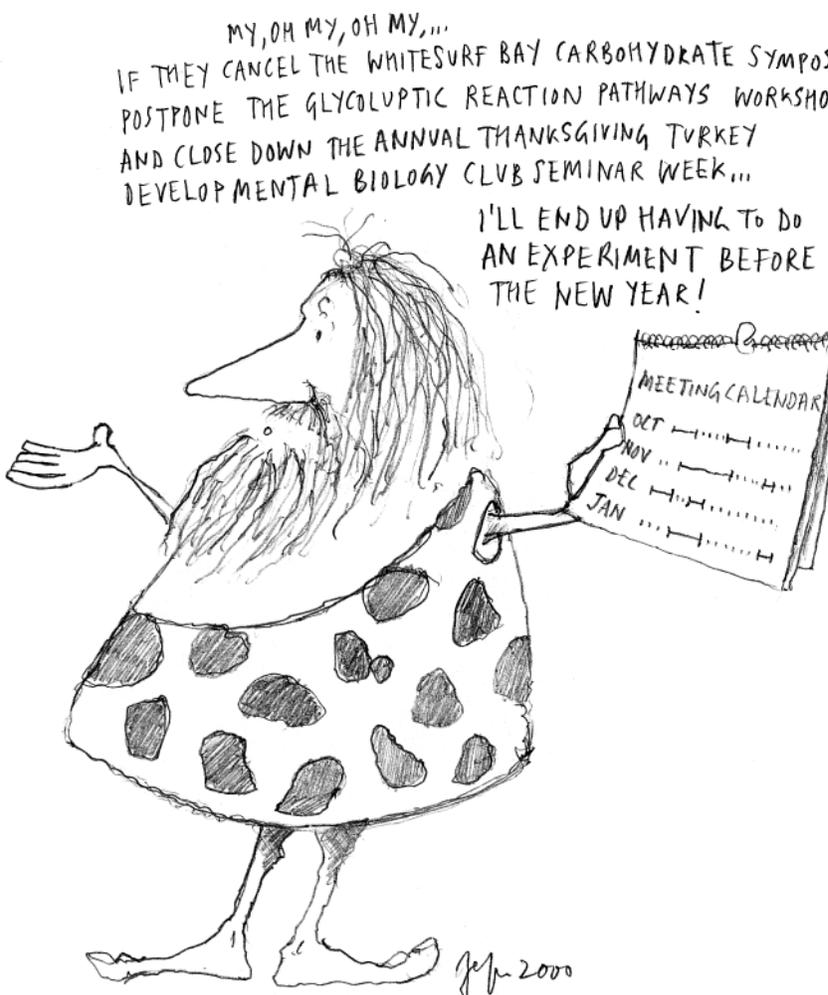


An occasional column, in which Caveman and other troglodytes involved in cell science emerge to share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Caveman and other contributors can be left at caveman@biologists.com. Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.



The slow death of scientific meetings

I think that meetings are the lifeblood of science. Meetings are the forum for free exchange of information, open discussion of ideas, access to new approaches and fields of study, and establishment of collaborations, and are where young scientists can present their work to a broad group of their peers. At least that was the idea and, I think, the reality not so long ago.

In the past, there were relatively few meetings (compared with today). Hence, attending one or two meetings a year was important not only for one's science, but also for one's career. There was a freshness about meetings – you emerged from the lab after months of work (in the dark) to the bright light of discussions about your conclusions and the work of others. Meetings were something to look forward to, an occasion to prepare the best data –

remember when it was a goal to get a really interesting series of experiments completed for presentation at a meeting? Also, attending plenary sessions when the rock stars of science talked was exciting, since this was the (only) time to hear the 'big picture' from the leaders of science.

Two significant changes in science culture over the years have reduced the importance of scientific meetings: redundancy, because of the way that science is broadcast, and burn-out brought on by too many meetings. The advent of electronic publication, the enormous growth in the number of journals, and the emphasis on short publication times have taken a great deal away from the need for one to go to meetings to hear the latest data and ideas. When it is possible to go from submission of data to publication in a few months, is there really any truly new data for presentation at meetings? The plethora of mini-reviews, commentaries,

news and views and other forms of informational sound bite have significantly reduced the novelty of attending plenary talks. The internet, and particularly e-mail, has brought colleagues closer together on a daily basis, resulting in less need to attend meetings to discuss science (and catch up on gossip!). It could be argued quite reasonably that these changes are generally for the good – quicker dissemination of information to everyone and equality (from the lab head to the graduate student) of access to the latest developments and ideas.

The biggest problem in my opinion is that there are now too many scientific meetings. But shouldn't more meetings lead to more discussion and scientific exchange? I argue that the answer is no. There are many more meetings (than there used to be) – count them. During the year, each scientific society has a major meeting and at least one or two satellite meetings at some other time.

Society collectives – for example, FASEB (Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology) and FEBS (Federation of European Biochemical Societies) – have additional meetings that tend to be more specialized in a given field and, hence, these are more frequent in order to cover all the fields in the collective. Finally, on the right side of The Pond are the ubiquitous ski meetings (sorry – Keystone Symposia) and Gordon Research Conferences. (I could go on and on about special meetings funded by government agencies, drug companies and institutions, but you get the idea.) I rest my case on this point.

So, what are the consequences of too many meetings? Redundancy and burn-out. Redundancy, because each meeting tends to cover very similar ground, and hence the same individuals come to the meetings and present the same data and ideas. Burn-out, because the individuals that attend these meetings

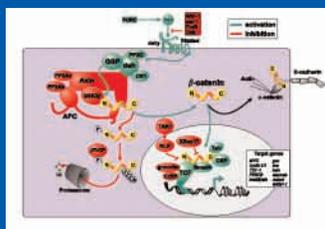
are bored - they meet the same people, present the same series of slides (If it's Tuesday, it must be Manchester!) and leave early in order to arrive in time for their talk at the next meeting. (What's the point? More on that topic in another article.)

There is a solution. As an individual, attend fewer meetings. This certainly removes the redundancy factor, but unfortunately not the burn-out factor, and this combination is still bad. You may be fresh for the meeting, but when you want to talk to someone who goes to all the meetings, they are still saturated, bored with giving the same answers and thinking about the same ideas, and always short of time (got to get away for my flight). But, then again, if enough of us decide to attend only one or two meetings a year, the burn-out factor will also be reduced.

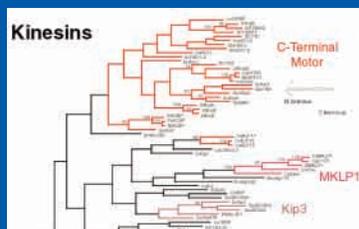
Caveman

Cell Science at a Glance

Our new section – Cell Science at a Glance – is included as a poster in the paper copy of the journal and available in several downloadable formats in the online version, which we encourage readers to download and use as slides. Future contributions to this section will include signalling pathways, phylogenetic trees, multiprotein complexes, useful reagents . . . and much more.



Wnt Signalling (October)



A Kinesin Tree (November)



Paxillin functions (December)

We would like to encourage readers to submit ideas for future contributions to this section. Potential Cell Science at a Glance articles should be addressed to the Staff Editor and sent to Journal of Cell Science, 140 Cowley Rd, Cambridge, UK CB4 0DL