

Interview with Professor Richard Frackowiak, BNA President

Professor Richard Frackowiak has recently been appointed to the presidency of the BNA. He is a rare breed, in that he is well respected both by clinical neurologists and neuroscientists. His research over the years has been impressive to say the least, with huge numbers of high impact papers highlighting the power of functional imaging in normal and disease states. He has been pioneering in the use of such scanning in delineating how the human brain actually functions normally and what can go wrong in disease. He has enormous energy and enthusiasm and has been inspirational to many trainee neurologists wishing to pursue careers in neurological science. He is an ideal person to take on this prestigious post, given his work which has straddled both basic neuroscience and neurological disease, and certainly my times as his registrar at Queen Square were memorable - RAB

How would you describe the role of the BNA?

To create a friendly environment within which young neuroscientists can exchange information, create networks that will be useful in their careers, expose themselves to their peers in an atmosphere that is rigorous but less intimidating than at major international meetings and to have a fun time with people who have similar interests but different experiences of neuroscience.

How do you see neuroscience informing clinical neurology and vice versa?

Science generates pathogenic ideas that clinical neurology needs to translate into diagnostic tests. It identifies therapeutic targets and treatments that clinical neurology must assess and evaluate. Clinical neurology poses relevant problems and provides material for investigation. The methods of rigorous science in controlled systems and observational science in humans must be appreciated by both constituencies so that relevant questions are asked and answered.

Is there an increasing need for neurologists and neuroscientists to work together, given the drive towards making all research clinically relevant?

Blue skies research is very important but so is problem solving. Our paymasters demand relevance and so, as a scientific constituency that deals with human ailments like dementia, stroke, neurodegeneration and developmental disorders – all of which are increasing with an enlarging and ageing population – we are in the spotlight and must deliver. The rapid translation from basic science to treatment is vital, especially in times of crisis (eg AIDS).

In other areas such as rehabilitation from brain injury the opportunities for progress are so new that clinicians and scientists must work together to understand what each is attempting to achieve. In general I believe that in modern science co-operation is better than bitter rivalry, or worse still any desire to maintain disciplinary purity.

How can we involve more clinical members in the work of the BNA?

By advertising, by encouragement, by indicating how much clinicians have to gain from exposing their work in a wider scientific forum and vice versa. By providing an intellectual as opposed to a professional home.

Do you think there is a problem in the UK that neurologists in training are being dissuaded from undertaking neuroscientific research?

There are problems arising from the rigid control of training numbers in neurological medicine. It is important that bright research hungry young clinicians do not become disenchanted because they see academic careers as disadvantageous in achieving professional status. Clinical scientific role models are important. The excitement of good science is more important still, as is the support of an intellectually challenging peer group.

What are your aspirations for British Neuroscience, and the BNA in particular over the next ten years?

British Neuroscience was the tops in the 50s and 60s. Funding for young neuroscientists is relatively good, there is no reason why we should not become tops again. The size of the UK is a problem, especially in comparison with our main competitor, the all-dominant USA. The solution in my eyes lies in Europe. There are so many intelligent, bright, numerate and ambitious neuroscientists on our continent, so many good laboratories to go to, to learn from. There are so many sources of funding to move and taste the different expertise and cultures in Europe that it should not be beyond us to look outwards, to escape from national parochialism and to embrace a European view of excellence in our field.

For those contemplating following in your footsteps can you estimate how much of your time is going to be spent on society business? Will you have to give up any of your clinical work?

Time will tell!



Richard Frackowiak MA, MD, DSc, FRCP, FMedSci, Dr (hon causa, Liege) is Vice-Provost (Special Projects) of University College London. He moved to the post from the Deanship of the Institute of Neurology, Queen Square which he held for 4 years. He is a Professor of Neurology and a Wellcome Trust Principal Clinical Research Fellow. He previously chaired the Wellcome Department of Imaging Neuroscience and its Functional Imaging Laboratory where he retains a research activity, holds a programme grant and remains a Principal Investigator. His scientific interest is in structural and functional brain mapping in health and disease. He obtained his research degree at the MRC Cyclotron Unit. He has won the IPSEN and Wilhelm Feldberg prizes. His scientific output includes over 300 peer reviewed papers and the books "Human Brain Function" and "Brain Mapping: The Disorders" published by Academic Press. He is 2nd in the list of authors of high impact neuroscience papers published in the decade 1989-1998 and is the 4th most highly cited British biomedical scientist in the decade 1990-1999.

Human Brain Function, Second Edition

Edited by RSJ Frackowiak, KJ Friston, CD Frith, RJ Dolan, CJ Price, S Zeki, J Ashburner, W Penny
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