

UK scientist and children's author wins EMBO Award for Communications 2004

Heidelberg, Germany. November 5, 2004



Fran Balkwill, Professor of Cancer Biology at the Barts & The London, Queen Mary's Medical School, is the 2004 winner of the EMBO Award for Communication in the Life Sciences. Balkwill receives the award in recognition of her outstanding contribution to science communication for children. The cancer researcher has authored 13 children's books, all imaginatively illustrated by Mic Rolph.

The books take a novel look at a range of topics from genetics to HIV and AIDS. Balkwill is also the Director of the 'Centre of the Cell', an exciting new interactive bioscience centre in London's East End.

The EMBO Award for Communication is presented annually to a practising life scientist in Europe who has made significant contributions to public understanding of science. Launched in 2002, the award highlights the exceptional efforts made by many scientists to combine science communication activities with a full-time research career.

Winners of the EMBO Communications Award are also nominated by EMBO for the European Commission's Descartes Prize for Science Communication.

The prize of Euro 5,000 and a handcrafted gold and silver medal will be presented to Fran Balkwill on November 5, 2004 at the EMBL/EMBO Science & Society Conference, "Time and Aging Mechanisms and Meanings" in Heidelberg, Germany.

Getting the message across

As well as her full-time role as a researcher and Director of the Cancer Research UK Translational Oncology Centre at Queen Mary, Fran Balkwill is a dedicated science communicator and educator. She has written 13 acclaimed children's books including the prize-winning *Cells Are Us* and *Cell Wars* and has also commissioned and edited several more.

“ The international jury applauded Balkwill for “her spectacular work in communicating important scientific concepts to the young” and were particularly impressed by “her untiring efforts to bring critical science and health messages to deprived communities and disadvantaged countries outside Europe.”

Illustrated by Mic Rolph, Balkwill's books combine punchy narrative with lively graphics, taking readers on a journey of discovery through the wonders of biology. The latest two books from Balkwill and Rolph, although equally entertaining, have a far more profound aim - saving lives. "Staying Alive: Fighting HIV/AIDS" and the upcoming revised edition, "You, Me and HIV" are aimed at educating children at risk of contracting HIV in sub-Saharan Africa.

Spreading the word

In Africa Research for Balkwill and Rolph's first book on HIV and Aids took the author and illustrator to South Africa, where they talked to children, teachers and health care professionals to determine the educational needs of the local communities.

Funding for the project was organised by Simon Gordon of Oxford University, who also came up with the original idea in 2000. In 2002, in collaboration with Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 19,000 copies of Staying Alive: Fighting HIV/AIDS were distributed free of charge throughout South Africa.

The second edition, "You, Me and HIV" also published by Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, is the result of a further trip to South Africa to assess the impact of the first book. The new edition incorporates revisions from teachers, students and community workers who have been actively working with the book.

You, Me and HIV will be available from January 2005 and thanks to funding from the Bill and Melissa Gates Foundation, will reach 100,000 more children and educators in sub-Saharan Africa.

Using Balkwill and Rolph's effective mix of colourful graphics and straightforward language, "You, Me and HIV" communicates the harsh realities of the risks of contracting HIV and AIDS in an engaging and direct way.

“ I am delighted to receive this award, but I don't look on it as an individual achievement. Without illustrator, Mic Rolph, the books would never have been a success. The Staying Alive team, my publisher, the Centre of the Cell team, members of my lab and numerous other people in the UK, Europe, South Africa and the US have helped and inspired me. The award is a great honour and I hope it will help stress the importance of science education for the young and bring attention to the plight of children at risk of HIV in Africa today ”

Centre of the Cell

Since 2001 Frances Balkwill has been the driving force behind a major science education project much closer to home. Housed within the new building for Bart's and The London, Queen Mary's School of Medicine in London's East End, the Centre of the Cell will open its doors to children and teenagers from surrounding areas in August 2006. Funding for the project has come from NESTA (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts), the Clore Duffield Foundation, the Mercers' Company, The London Development Agency, the Petchey Foundation and a number of local London organisations. Balkwill is Director of this innovative bioscience centre aimed at young children, teenagers and their teachers. The Centre of the Cell is the first ever science education centre located within a medical school with working research laboratories. The aim is to allow visitors to experience the 'real thing' and draw them into the exciting world of biomedical research through a series of interactive exhibits and hands-on activities. In addition to covering national curriculum topics related to cells, microbes and disease, the centre will also highlight the latest tissue and cell research from the Queen Mary Medical School. A virtual website and e-learning programme will help the centre expand its reach to many more young people around the world.

Note for Editors

About EMBO

The European Molecular Biology Organisation (EMBO) promotes biosciences in Europe. Through initiatives such as fellowships, courses and workshops, EMBO supports transnational mobility, training and exchange at all stages of the scientific career. The organisation was founded in 1964 and an example of its early impact was the establishment of the well-known laboratory, EMBL. EMBO elects new members annually on the basis of proven excellence in research. Today the organization has approximately 1200 European members and 100 associate members worldwide including some 38 Nobel Laureates.

www.embo.org

About the Barts & The London, Queen Mary's School of Medicine and Dentistry

Created from two historic medical schools: St Bartholomew's Hospital Medical College (Barts, established in 1843) and the Royal London Hospital Medical College (The London, England's oldest medical college established in 1785). The School of Medicine and Dentistry moved into a new phase in 1995 with the merger of these famous clinical schools with Queen Mary, University of London. The School has a strong tradition of providing high quality, state-of-the-art undergraduate education and an acclaimed reputation in clinical, medical and health research.

www.qmul.ac.uk

Press Contacts

EMBO
Lindsay Johnson
Communications Officer
Postfach 102240
D-69012 Heidelberg
Germany

Tel: 0049 6221 8891 108
Fax: 0049 6221 8891 200
Lindsay.Johnson@embo.org

Queen Mary's School of
Medicine and Dentistry
Sally Webster
Deputy Head of Press & PR
External Relations &
Communications
Department
Queen Mary, University of
London
Mile End Road London E1
4NS England

Tel: 0044 20 7882 5404
E-mail:
s.webster2qmul.ac.uk

Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press
John Inglis, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press
1 Bungtown Road
Cold Spring Harbor
NY 11724 USA

Tel: 001 516 422 4005
Fax: 001 516 422 4092
E-mail: inglis@schl.edu