

Annual Schools Science Conference

Healthcare scientists, students and teachers came together during National Science and Engineering Week for a one-day conference designed to promote careers in healthcare to school-leavers. Working group member Sue Alexander reports.

Against all the odds, the 4th Annual Schools Science Conference took place on 15 March at Kensington Town Hall during National Science and Engineering Week. Previously supported by funding from the North West London Strategic Health Authority Workforce Development Team, this year's conference had to seek funding from alternative sources. Although planning and the organisation of the event went ahead as usual, it was only a month before the event that the working group knew that sufficient funds had been raised.

So, faith in the project paid off and the conference proved to be bigger and better than ever. Around 400 school students and their teachers were able to experience the

full range of activities and take part in various competitions. The day started with a mass assembly in the main hall, during which Dr Keith Ison (Federation for Healthcare Science) and Pippa Hodgson (Skills for Health) entertained and enlightened the students, with an emphasis on how important science is in life and how adaptable and flexible learning and career development can be.

BODY IMAGE TO BIOTERRORISM

After the initial introduction, the students were able to wander around the three levels of Kensington Town Hall to sample the wide range of talks and practical activities set up and run by healthcare scientist (HCS) and

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allied health professional (AHP) volunteers. The delights of the healthy eating presentation, entitled 'Meat and 2 Veg', included the chance to assess the weight of a lump of fat. This series of short presentations covered aspects of body image and the psychological issues affecting eating.

Workshops on subjects such as avian influenza and the defence against bioterrorism ensured that the students understood that working in science meant dealing with hot and topical issues, and it also gave them the chance to ask questions. A major theme of the event was the portrayal of scientists as real people with interesting and worthwhile jobs, rather than the stereotypical scary, long-haired image of the



A mass assembly of around 400 school students and their teachers saw the Schools Science Conference get off to a flying start.



The opportunity to suture 'wounds' on a very realistic imitation 'arm' was a popular exercise.

REPORT

mad scientist that seems to have become ingrained in popular culture.

HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE

The largest part of the day by far was devoted to the vast array of exhibition stands set up by an army of enthusiastic volunteers. Biomedical science was well represented, with displays from all the diagnostic services that focused, for example, on infection control, blood transfusion and gene therapy.

The students were able to get hands-on experience of diagnostic imaging, the preparation of pharmaceutical products, looking at histological sections and specimens, and a chance to suture 'wounds' on a very realistic imitation 'arm'.

Relevant universities, professional bodies and careers advisors had stands and they provided material to help students plan their A-levels for particular career paths. There was also some very useful material provided by the IBMS.

TIPS FOR HEALTHY LIVING

The theme underpinning the day's activities was 10 tips for healthy living, as published by the DH, and the students were required to collect all the tips during the course of the event.

It has become a tradition to invite an Olympic medallist to end the day with an inspirational talk and to present the prizes when the students reassemble in the main hall. This year's Olympian was science teacher Alison Mowbray, who won a rowing silver medal at the Athens games.

Alison took up rowing by chance and simply aimed higher and higher, proving that if you believe in yourself and "do something" you can achieve your ambitions. The students were inspired, the prizes were awarded and the volunteers packed up and went home for a well-deserved rest.

SCHOOLS SCIENCE CONFERENCE WORKING GROUP

- Dr Don Henderson
The Hammersmith Hospitals NHS Trust
- Sue Alexander
The Royal Marsden NHS Foundation Trust
- Danya Cohen
The Hammersmith Hospitals NHS Trust
- Manfred Almeida
The Hammersmith Hospitals NHS Trust
- Chrystalla Ferrier
The Royal Brompton NHS Trust
- Mike Carter
Health Protection Agency
- Moira Wilson
NWL SHA
- Louisa Mullan
The Royal College of Pathologists
- Sharon Gage
SRG Project Management



Students were able to experience a range of hands-on opportunities including diagnostic imaging.

IMPORTANT FEEDBACK

From the feedback received, the organising committee is confident that the students found the event both enjoyable and stimulating. They particularly appreciated the opportunity to meet the healthcare professionals, learn more about each discipline and to try their hand at the various demonstrations and exhibits.

The students were awestruck with the sheer number, variety and complexity of the professions represented. This was a friendly, fun and relaxed atmosphere in which to meet the professionals, and the presenters' excitement and enthusiasm for their work impressed the students.

Although many students already had considered careers in the health sector, a massive 88% said they would consider joining the NHS on the strength of what they had seen and heard during the course of the day, and there was a significant increase in the number of students intending to study science and continue through to higher

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education. More than 80% of the students rated healthcare professionals as exciting and 97% would recommend the Schools Science Conference to their friends.

The teachers reported that the event was useful to their students and that previous conferences had provided encouragement to enter a healthcare career pathway, with students opting for biomedical science, optometry, podiatry, speech and language therapy, physiotherapy and radiography, in addition to medicine, dentistry and nursing. The Schools Science Conference had a strong positive influence on students' career aspirations, subject choices and motivation to study science.

The organising committee was delighted with the success of this year's event and has begun to plan the 2008 conference, provisionally booked for 12 March. Anyone willing to help on this busy but worthwhile day should email sharon.gage@srgprojectmanagement.co.uk, with 'School Science Volunteer' in the subject box. ■

Main sponsors of the Schools Science Conference were Abbott Diagnostics, London Development Agency/Capital Skills/Skills for Health, Olympus, Royal Society of Chemistry and The Advice Clinic, London.

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One of the many exhibition stands.