
Reports of Meetings

The Italian health institute takes part in the Science Picnic

Warsaw, Poland, 28 May 2011

The Science Picnic held in Warsaw is considered the largest European outdoor event dedicated to science (<http://www.pikniknaukowy.pl/2011/en/>). Its aim is to promote and disseminate science culture and technological innovation among the general public, particularly among young people.

Organized by the Polish Radio and the Copernicus Science Centre, Science Picnic has been held since 1997 in one of Warsaw's parks. Research centres, educational institutions, museums, science foundations, and other organizations from Poland and many other European countries take this opportunity to present themselves and their achievements to families and visitors. This year about 100,000 people visited the many stands and participated in the hands-on activities (interactivity was required by the organisers), and in educational and artistic shows, and fascinating experiments, tests, and games.

In 2005 the European Commission considered the Science Picnic to be one of the 10 best projects in the field of "Science in Society", and this led to a renewed enthusiasm for popular science exhibitions all over Europe. Each year the Copernicus Science Centre surveys participants' opinions of the event and also their perception of the role of science.

The Science Picnic is devoted to a different subject each year, lately: The world in 10 years' time; Mathematics and us; Learn the language of science; Science among the stars; The great microworld. This year's theme was particularly attractive: Freedom. Freedom in science means also freedom of knowledge, freedom of dissemination, and free access to health information, to research results, to prevention, and to cures.

These are some of the core missions of the Italian National Institute of Health (Istituto Superiore di Sanità, ISS), which was invited to participate by the Italian Cultural Institute and the Italian Embassy in Warsaw. The Italian

stand was organized through close collaboration among these three Italian institutes. In choosing the issues to present, the ISS prioritised the promotion of public health and of the open access models in science publishing. Topics related to prevention of cardiovascular diseases through adopting a healthy Mediterranean diet and reduced salt consumption; appropriate use of antibiotics to prevent antibiotic resistance; preventive vaccination when travelling to an area with malaria; and collaboration between health institutions at global level through the NECOBELAC project (Network of Collaboration Between Europe & Latin American-Caribbean countries, <http://www.necobelac.eu/en/index.php>).¹

At the Italian stand the messages were conveyed to the general public through posters, bookmarks, and leaflets, with the aid of practical demonstrations and fun activities. The presence of a scientific clown was appreciated by the youngest visitors. It was not easy to translate into simple words concepts that are usually directed to a highly specialized community – not to mention the difficulties encountered in translating all the material into Polish and in addressing the visitors in the local language.

The 237 stands scattered over the 40,000 square metres of the park were under the honorary patronage of the European Commission, which, under a huge attractive tent, distributed thousands of miniature copies of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland and performed a number of amusing experiments.

The success of the whole event and of the Italian participation demonstrated that science can be easy for everyone to enjoy and that themes usually considered arduous could be suitable for all visitors. The European Union itself suggests that the opinion of the general public should be taken into account when making decisions about science and technology.²

The open access (OA) publication model is usually addressed to the community of researchers, but a new category of OA beneficiaries, outside the core research community, including students, educators, health operators and patients, is now emerging and starting to use scientific literature.³ Their need for free access to health information and for easily conveyed messages can be partly fulfilled through popular events like science picnics, fairs, educational programmes, museum exhibitions, and other cultural or scientific initiatives devoted specifically to families and children. It is widely accepted that an interest in science should be cultivated at a very young age. Web 2.0 applications and the rapid advance in communication technologies are facilitating the flow of health knowledge and the cooperation in the creation of editorial contents, and it is within this framework that the NECOBELAC project was promoted at the Science Picnic, highlighting



Hands-on at Warsaw's Science Picnic

the importance of creating a network of collaboration and a fruitful exchange of training experiences between institutes and countries at a global level.

The format of a Science Picnic works well and could be used in other countries to promote scientific communication to the general public. It is certainly a very pleasant experience for everyone involved!

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- 2 European Union. DG Research. Monitoring policy and research activities on Science in Society in Europe (MASIS). National report, Poland. October 2010. http://www.masis.eu/files/reports/MASIS_Poland_report.pdf (accessed 15 June 2011).
- 3 Davis PM. Open access, readership, citations: a randomized controlled trial of scientific journal publishing. *FASEB Journal* 2011(March 30):1-6. <http://www.fasebj.org/content/early/2011/03/29/fj.11-183988.full.pdf>. doi: 10.1096/fj.11-18398