

Get to Know Brain Awareness Week Partners



An Interview with Roland Pochet, Ph.D.

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Dana Foundation (DF): Each year for Brain Awareness Week (BAW), the Belgian Brain Council organizes a range of events throughout Belgium. Last year's program included a series of events addressing Alzheimer's disease, workshops on brain functioning for students, special conferences for seniors, and more. What are you planning for BAW 2011?

Roland Pochet (RP): For 2011, Belgian Brain Council (BBC) board members are coordinating nine activities, including conferences within schools, Café des Sciences, open laboratories, and a debate with policy makers. For complete information on these events, please visit the [BAW International Calendar](#).

DF: Planning events throughout the country requires collaboration with local presenters and organizers. What do you think are the most important aspects of a successful collaborative relationship?

RP: Personal relationships are one important aspect, as is the use of a national platform. The BBC has visibility and a good reputation. Previous years' events have also been successful in part because of visibility through a dedicated [Web page](#). The main obstacle has been the limited availability of the concerned experts

DF: Each year for BAW, the Council organizes a conference on the brain at the European Parliament (EP). How do you decide on the presentation topics?

RP: The Brain Awareness Day at the EP is now in its third year. The launching of such an event is a complex procedure involving several partners and negotiations with STOA, the Science and Technology Options Assessment panel at the EP.

The day is divided into five parts:

1. A student visit to the European Parliament hosted by my friend Francois Brunagel, head of protocol.
2. A press conference organized by the STOA President, which takes place during the student visit.
3. A keynote address given by a top scientist in an impressive conference room with simultaneous translation into three languages. The speaker is introduced by the STOA chair. The audience of about 200 people consists of students (15-18 years old) and policy makers (mostly civil servants from the European Commission and members of the European Parliament, or MEPs). The address is followed by questions and answers. The conference is video recorded and downloaded to the [BBC Web site](#).
4. A lunch held for 25 people at the Restaurant des Parlementaires, an exclusive club. This year the U.K. Ambassador, Croatian Ambassador, and the director of the UK Research Office are invited. The lunch brings “Convivialité,” closer conversation and networking, which are important for BAW visibility. This lunch is possible thanks to the financial support of the BBC and is a means to thank the participants.
5. An afternoon debate between the keynote speaker, neuroscience experts, and a delegate from the pharmaceutical industry, which is moderated by the STOA vice-president.

With the help of the [EDAB network](#), I submit the conference topic and choice of keynote speaker, based on the current political “Zeitgeist,” to the STOA board for agreement and further submission to all STOA members. For instance, the topic chosen this year, “Education: A Lifelong Challenge for the Brain,” fits perfectly with a [communication](#) from the European Commission to the EP, the BBC, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions under the name “Europe 2020 Flagship Initiative Innovation Union” stating: “In times of fiscal constraints, the EU and member states need to continue to invest in education, R & D [research and development], innovation, and Information and Communication Technologies. Such investments should, where possible, not only be protected from budget cuts, but should be stepped up. Our education systems at all levels need to be modernized.”

DF: The Council was formed in March 2005 to improve treatments for neurological and psychiatric diseases and to raise public awareness of diseases of the brain. Could you identify some of the markers by which you measure the Council’s success in these areas?

RP: The evidence based markers are:

- 1) Assistance to BAW in terms of competence, manpower, and networking
- 2) Articles and files published in the press:
 - http://www.belgianbraincouncil.be/files/Le_Soir_BBC_Chambre.pdf
 - http://www.belgianbraincouncil.be/files/BRAIN_Belgium_DS_September09.pdf
 - http://cordis.europa.eu/search/index.cfm?fuseaction=news.document&N_RCN=31892

- http://www.belgianbraincouncil.be/files/la_libre_mars_2010.pdf
- 3) Scientific and logistic support (including fundraising) from the BBC
 - 4) Press conference and radio interviews
 - 5) Contact with policy makers:
 - http://www.belgianbraincouncil.be/files/Lettre_Assoc_FR.pdf
 - http://www.belgianbraincouncil.be/files/Chambre_public_health.pdf
 - 6) Study on the COST of Brain Diseases:
 - http://www.belgianbraincouncil.be/fr/announces/cost_disease.html
 - http://www.belgianbraincouncil.be/files/Research_Ressources_Belgium.pdf

DF: An important aspect of the Council's work is lobbying the government to support neuroscience research. What advice do you have for other BAW partners who would like to educate policymakers on the importance of this research?

RP: As far as Europe is concerned, 2014 will probably be the European Year of the Brain (EYOB). A European Year is a focused theme agreed upon by European institutions and then run throughout the year in the member states.

This is a unique opportunity for partners to contact their parliamentary members and emphasize the potential of an EYOB, which could:

- Increase the profile of all brain diseases in every member state
- Draw attention to the costs and impact of brain diseases now and into the future
- Increase funding for brain research through the framework programs and in the member states
- Increase efforts to educate, inform, and advise those living with brain diseases in order to improve their quality of life
- Recognize the increasingly important role of caregivers for people living with brain disorders
- Promote normal brain function and development and address barriers to these goals
- Draw attention to health inequalities in brain diseases
- Develop action plans at local, national, regional, and European levels to address specific areas related to brain diseases
- Influence policy decisions over the next 5-10 years.

DF: High school students are invited to attend the events at the Parliament, and the Council also organizes BAW events for middle school students. Can you please talk about why you believe it is important to educate young people on these issues?

RP: Gathering young students in an appropriate environment (university lab, prestigious conference rooms, etc) with highly competent speakers awakens the importance of research and neuroscience to young people. Experimental demonstrations and student involvement in experiments are also invaluable and have a strong impact on students' long-term memory and as such are priceless for education and brain awareness.

DF: As a long time member of the European Dana Alliance for the Brain, a member of Euroscience, and an elected chair of the European Cooperation in Science and Technology's Biomedicine and Molecular Biosciences domain, you are involved in the international conversation about the current state of neuroscience research. What do you see as the most pressing issues in neuroscience at this moment?

RP: The pressing issues are numerous. A recent article (to be published in the European Journal of Neuroscience) reflects changes in research priorities and advances in brain research that have taken place since 2006. From this document and reflecting my point of view, I would like to stress the need to increase interdisciplinary research efforts to gain a better understanding of basic brain development mechanisms and function before engaging in hazardous and expensive clinical trials.

Two additional topics that look very timely to me are:

- 1) Stem-cell research for therapeutic interventions in various neurodegenerative, affective, and cerebrovascular disorders should be a priority driven from the top-down. A detailed understanding of basic stem-cell biology is needed for cell-replacement therapy if researchers are to control the induction of particular cellular phenotypes. The transplantation approach also needs to be boosted so the anatomical and functional integration of grafts into pre-existing circuits will be improved. Better molecular imaging methods to monitor how the graft functions *in vivo* are also a priority.
- 2) Abnormal brain development contributes to a wide range of diseases, like autism, schizophrenia, and depression. The burden of such diseases is very high worldwide, especially as many are untreatable. Understanding the biological processes that underpin abnormal brain development is of critical importance.

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