Just A Minute...

...Marie Jönsson, who defended her thesis today, October 30th, and became Dr. Jönsson. She has investigated what is necessary for stem cell therapy to become reality in the treatment of Parkinson's disease.

What have you found?
– There are three articles in my thesis. In the first one, we have showed in what maturity state the dopamine cells should be, in order to survive and integrate optimally after transplantation. In the second one we have showed that principally one of the two most common dopamine cell types in the midbrain is important for restoration of motor activity.
– These two results indicate the direction in which we should go. In the third article we have applied this knowledge on embryonic stem cells. We have isolated the mature stem cells and the cell type we want, shown that they survive and give rise to the cell type we want, and that formation of tumours after transplantation is avoided.

Sounds like good news!
– Yes, this is a first step towards being able to use alternative cell sources for transplantation. We are now focusing on investigating this in human stem cells.

Have you discovered anything else during your time here?
– Yes, that I actually thought it was fun to write up my thesis. Everyone has talked about how horrible it is and I have dreaded it all these years, so I was pleasantly surprised when I discovered that I enjoyed it!

The thesis title is “Identification of dopamine neuron progenitors in the embryonic midbrain and stem cell cultures. Studies on the role of neuronal subtype and differentiation state for cell replacement in a rodent model of Parkinson’s disease.”

News in Brief

Congratulations Johan and Manolo!
Bagadilico got two positions for researchers and three project grants in Vetenskapssrädet’s (Swedish Research Counsil’s) decision on support for medical research.
Johan Jakobsson and Manolo Carta got post-doc positions including project grants. Patrik Brundin, Deniz Kirik och Jia-Yi Li got 1 550 000, 800 000 and 500 000 Swedish kronor, respectively, per year for three years. Congratulations to all!

More new jobs...
Christian Hansen has won a one-year fellowship from Hjärnfonden (the Swedish Brain Foundation). This means he’ll be with us at least until May 2011, perhaps even longer, as there is a possibility of another year’s extension. We’re keeping all our fingers crossed!
Carl Grenvall is a new Ph.D. student with Thomas Laurell and will be working on separation of cells using sound waves. Welcome to Bagadilico!

Bagadilico in Sydsvenskan
Bagadilico members appeared in Sydsvenskan on October 18th in a story about Parkinson research in Lund. Rohit Sachdeva and Srikanth Ranganathan were interviewed, and Bagadilico and MultiPark were mentioned as examples on multidisciplinary projects that have received large research grants. Strategic research areas were described as one of five trends in Swedish educational policies. Click here to read the story.

Deniz Kirik and Åsa Petersén win Australian fellowship
Deniz Kirik and Åsa Petersén have been selected as the Allan and Maria Myers International visiting fellows for 2009.
As part of this, they are invited to visit Australia’s leading brain research institute, the Florey Neuroscience Institute at the University of Melbourne. They plan to be in Australia for about six weeks from mid-January. We’re not jealous at all!

Åsa Petersén and Maria Björkqvist in Forskning & Medicin
Åsa Petersén’s and Maria Björkqvist’s research on Huntington’s disease is taken up in the latest issue of the Swedish Research Counsil’s magazine Forskning & Medicin. Åsa Petersén focuses on early psychiatric symptoms caused by the disease, Maria Björkqvist on searching for biomarkers. Click here to read the story (in Swedish).

More Maria!
Maria Björkqvist has also published a Neuroview in Neuron, co-authored by Edward J Wild and Sarah J Tabrizi.
– We review the potential utility of using immune molecules as markers for neurodegenerative diseases. We discuss this possibility and potential limitations of such immune markers, says Maria Björkqvist.
Click here to read the article.
Have a cup of coffee and confront a scientist. The first Parkinson café, held on Monday October 12th, was a big hit with the visitors.

– I can’t believe I have met these incredibly prominent researchers. I’m overwhelmed, says Eskil Rundcrantz, diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease two years ago, who drove 100 kilometres to participate.

Informing about our activities and research results is a liability of the university. And who would be more interested in medical research than people suffering from disease?

This is why Bagadilico has started to arrange “Parkinson cafés” – the first one held a few weeks ago. The idea is for patients and their families to get a chance to meet with and ask questions to researchers.

The visitors had been invited via patient organizations and it is apparent that there is a great demand for direct contacts with scientists – not a single chair in the room was left empty.

Håkan Widner opened with a lecture on how clinical research works. Anders Björklund then informed about a new drug against involuntary movements that will soon be subject to clinical tests.

After that, it was time for coffee, cake and questions. A relative to one of the patients wondered:

– I read a quite optimistic story about stem cell therapy in a magazine. It sounded as if a cure for Parkinson with the aid of stem cells is very close. Is this just science fiction?

– I think that they are in the front line of the truth there. Stem cells are not a cure in that way, rather a way of helping the brain to repair itself. There is a lot of work being done on this, but the solution is still far away, answered Anders Björklund.

Another visitor wondered:

– I get the feeling that patient groups want a standardised treatment against Parkinson’s, but isn’t this hard to achieve?

– Yes, we want to avoid monotherapy and the use of only l-dopa. The younger you are, the larger the risk of developing involuntary movements after treatment with l-dopa. There are benefits of an early combination treatment, so that you don’t put all your eggs in one basket, answered Håkan Widner.

The questions never wanted to end and it was apparent that the interest in more Parkinson cafés is very big.

So, more cafés will be organized in the future – the next one, at the end of January, will be about gene therapy.

– There is a great value in doing this. And it also stimulates us researchers, especially ones like me, who work in the laboratory and have very little contact with patients, says Anders Björklund.

Want more? Read the full story by clicking here.
The **Robin Hood of science**

She was born with a silver spoon in her mouth, but fights for democracy. Elin Bommenel is the Robin Hood of science.

– *My tombstone will read: “She made research accessible”, says Elin Bommenel.*

Bagadilico is infiltrated by people who don’t do medical research. They are few, but they exist, and they are interested in a little thing called “society”.

One of them is Elin Bommenel, who describes herself as a historian of science and technology. The aim of her short research project within Bagadilico is to find out what we mean by “scientific success” and how we work to make it happen.

Her Ph.D. thesis was on the Vipeholm experiments, carried out in a hospital for mentally and physically handicapped in Lund in the 1940s and 50s.

The “uneducable retards”, as they were referred to, were fed large amounts of sweets in order to determine whether sugar caused dental caries.

– That was a horrible way of treating people. It was a horrible way, but that is not the interesting part. The interesting part is, it was legitimate.

Nearly 60 years after publication, the Vipeholm experiments are still incredibly well cited, and textbooks in cariology still refer to them.

– How could these experiments be given so much political legitimacy? The entire Swedish public dental care system was redone from the results, that eating sweets was bad for the teeth. But what creates this scientific credibility?

Exactly this question is the centre that Elin Bommenel’s scientific universe revolves around: How do we create credibility for our research? Elin wants to identify the stuff required to succeed, and make it visible. It’s a question of democracy.

At this point, it is necessary to know a few things about Elin Bommenel. She was born in Lund, the daughter of two professors. Later, her parents divorced and are now both remarried – to scientists.

– I have four parents with Ph.D. degrees. I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth.

The world of research is a web of secrets, Elin explains. Scientists don’t become rich, but we get recognition and social status, and we gain from keeping secret how this status is obtained, how to behave in certain situations in order to be accepted.

– This leads to kids of academics, like myself, getting the advantage of people who might be a lot more talented, and to research missing out on talents we desperately need.

– I want to de-mystify these secrets. Science needs to be opened up for democratic reasons. It’s good for society and good for the individual. This is my calling: making the invisible visible. My tombstone will read “She made research accessible”, says Elin Bommenel.

**The Facts of Elin**

**Age:** 38.

**Lives:** On Sölvegatan, same street as her office and many of the university departments. “You wake up feeling intellectual and you go to bed feeling intellectual”, Elin jokes.

**Family:** Husband Olivier and daughter Anna.

**This you didn’t know about Elin:** She has butchered over 100 cows, worked as a waitress in five countries and written three books – but not a single refereed article.

**In ten years from now:** She has her own research group, working for interdisciplinarity and transparency in research.

**Apart from Elin Bommenel, two other Bagadilico members do research on societal, cultural and ethical aspects:**

Professor Susanne Lundin studies the cultural implications of new reproductive technologies, gene therapy, stem cell research, transplantations and the use of transgenic animals.

Ph.D. student Niclas Hagen studies societal aspects of Huntington’s disease.

*Who do you think should be this newsletter’s Employee of the Month? E-mail me: christel.thunell@med.lu.se.*