

Public engagement with science:

'Food addiction: fact or fiction' - An interactive workshop for the public

Introduction

The European Commission has a strong commitment to engaging the public in dialogue about the science that it funds. <http://ec.europa.eu/research/science-society/index.cfm?fuseaction=public.topic&id=1223&lang=1>

The two main reasons for encouraging the public to engage with scientific research cited by the Commission are:

- 1) Ensuring that the right policy decisions are made by the Commission by facilitating appropriate dialogue between scientists, the public and policy stakeholders; and
- 2) Increase the number of people who choose to study scientific subjects and work in research and scientific careers.

Projects that the EU funded as part of its Seventh Framework Programme for Research (FP7) were challenged to include a dissemination plan which addressed several audiences including public and policy. The NeuroFAST project was no exception, and has a workpackage involving all project partners on 'Stakeholder and public health policy engagement'.

How to engage

There are many different ways of engaging people with research, from illustrated lectures, exhibitions and shows, to the

more interactive and discursive forms of engagement such as informal 'café' settings for discussions and interactive workshops, and the more structured but intensive engagement models such as Citizens' Juries, which can examine contentious topical issues and look at possible options put forward by policy makers.

British Science Festival

The British Science Festival is held every year in a different city in the UK. It is organised by the British Science Association, and is one of Europe's largest celebrations of science, engineering and technology. Over 250 events, activities, exhibitions and trips take place during the week-long programme.

In September 2012, the Festival was hosted by the University of Aberdeen, giving the Aberdeen partners in the NeuroFAST project an excellent opportunity to propose an event to discuss some of the research being undertaken as part of the project.

Food addiction: fact or fiction?

A two-hour interactive workshop entitled 'Food addiction: fact or fiction' was accepted into the festival programme under the general heading of 'Talks and debates'. The event was a joint initiative between project partners from

the University of Aberdeen Rowett Institute, and the University of Essen, Germany. The event was described in the programme as follows:

'There are many complex factors which lead to people being overweight or obese, but the basic question is 'why do some people eat too much?' Are they addicted to food? Join our international panel of psychiatrists and scientists to explore whether eating food can be so rewarding that it leads to a state of addiction similar to that seen with alcohol and drugs.'



The Festival organisers promoted the event as suitable for 'everyone'.

The Festival was widely promoted round Aberdeen and its surrounding areas, and was given a great deal of pre-event publicity by a regional newspaper.

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Format of the event

A flavour of the event can be gained by watching the 5 minute film which features some short clips from the workshop and is available on the NeuroFAST web site.

The workshop was presented by Professor Julian Mercer (University of Aberdeen Rowett Institute) and Dr Özgür Albayrak (University of Duisberg-Essen, Germany) and was Chaired by Dr Sue Bird (University of Aberdeen Rowett Institute). The event also featured some food-based interactive challenges run by Dr Michelle Murphy and Ms Tina Bake (University of Aberdeen Rowett Institute). Over 170 people attended the workshop and it was listed as being sold out in the Festival online programme a few days before the actual event.

Professor Mercer kicked off the event by describing the background to the obesity epidemic, recent changes in our food environment and how this may have affected our eating behaviour, and how the topic of food addiction is portrayed in the media.

A special feature of the workshop was the use of hand-held voting sets by the audience to express their views on a range of issues. They were asked questions such as:

'Do you believe that food addiction exists?'
'Have you given up sugar in tea or coffee?'
'Did you like the taste of beer when you first tried it?'

This interactivity helped the audience to understand the concept of how appetite and eating is controlled, by reflecting on their own experiences with food. The feedback from the event (see below) clearly showed that this aspect of the event was highly appreciated by the audience.

Dr Albayrak then introduced his psychiatrists' perspective and explained how addiction is defined in a clinical setting. It was quite challenging for the audience to take on board that there is a strict definition of addiction such that to date the knowledge about food and its potentially addictive properties is insufficient to diagnose any individual as being addicted to food. Dr Albayrak explained that the term 'food addiction' may be applicable to a small section of the population suffering from binge-eating disorder or bulimia nervosa.

This was followed by more on the biology linking food consumption and addiction (Prof Mercer), with an evolutionary perspective, and finally there was an open discussion session with questions from the audience. A paper which describes in more detail some of the science behind addiction is available on the NeuroFAST web site.

Finally the audience were invited to come down to the front of the lecture theatre and to take part in interactive challenges run by Dr Michelle Murphy and Ms Tina Bake looking at the amount of sugar and fat in some common foods. Prof Mercer and Dr Albayrak were also available for informal one-to-one conversations with members of the audience at the end of the workshop.

The accompanying pictures show that the informal sessions at the end of the event were very much appreciated by the audience.

Evaluating the event

The event was evaluated by feedback forms. 121 participants completed the

forms, the majority of whom were in the age range 19-40. Over 80% of the respondents reported that they found the event enjoyable and interesting. Slightly less (around 70%) said it was what they expected. The overwhelming majority of respondents (90%) said they had learned something new, 80% that they thought it was relevant to their own life.

Some quotes from the forms are given here:

What did you enjoy most about the event?

'Interactive element'

'Info and questions'

'Julian gave an interesting talk'

'Raised lots of interesting questions'

'Well presented, thank you'

'The interactive voting'

'Was accessible to all, well paced, good overview'

'Information which was light and informal'

It is clear that the style of the presenters, being able to bring in some humour and a variety of styles, is important to the success of this type of event.

Press conference

Prof Mercer and Dr Albayrak attended a Festival press conference the day after the workshop which was attended by around 25 reporters. The story was covered by nearly all the UK national papers.

The press release can be viewed here <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/rowett/news/1913/>

An example of the press coverage can be viewed here <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2199663/Food-addiction-fuelling-obesity-crisis-scientists-believe-200-people-suffering-condition.html>