Local Advocacy Activities—Here’s How We Do It Here in Tennessee!

HEIDI HAMM, PRESIDENT

Research! America has shocking data indicating that upwards of 80% of Americans cannot name a living scientist. This means that most of our neighbors next door or across the street probably are not aware that they are living next to a scientist. One of the major projects I have taken on during my presidency of ASBMB is to get more of our members active in their local communities in spreading the word to the media, the general public, and to elected representatives about the importance of the work we do as scientists. One of the best ways to do this is to actually meet with these people regularly, and that is what a group of my students and I have begun to do here in Nashville.

We have been meeting since the fall with Newt Williams, a former CEO of Hoechst Marion Roussel Canada Inc. and the former vice president for government affairs with Celanese. Newt has retired to Nashville and has been a wonderful mentor and advisor to our group. His level of commitment to our cause is second to none. He has been able to give us a very solid basic course in local advocacy, having practiced it for so many years himself. Under his expert tutelage, we have been arranging a series of meetings with local members of Congress.
We had our first meeting, with Rep. Jim Cooper (D-TN) at the end of December. Cooper is serving his eighth term in Congress and serves on three committees: Budget, Oversight & Government Reform, and Armed Services. Our meeting with him was very successful. He had scheduled us for an hour, but he stayed for almost two hours, discussing our issues and clearly enjoying himself. For some perspective on how extraordinary this is, a typical meeting in Washington—if you meet with the member at all instead of a staffer—is usually 15–20 minutes. This is one of the major reasons why meeting with members when they are home—which is about half the time—is so valuable.

Three graduate students in the Department of Pharmacology at Vanderbilt, Ashley Torain, Tim Panosian, and Efrain Garcia (who recently defended his thesis), gave presentations on the economic benefits of biomedical research, discovering treatments for drug abuse, and NIH research’s impact on the military. Then we took him on a tour of our high throughput screening facility at Vanderbilt to show him how biomedical research can lead to breakthroughs that lead to new drugs. Of course, as with all fundamental research, there is a long road to follow before it is put to actual use in patients, but these discoveries will someday have very direct effects on the lives of Americans.

During the tour, Jeff Conn, our director of Drug Discovery, showed Rep. Cooper a very dramatic video of a rat model of Parkinson disease in which the rat gets up and walks out of its cage when it is infused with a molecule that Jeff discovered silences an overactive inhibitory synapse in the basal ganglia involved in the immobility and rigidity seen in Parkinson patients.

Cooper is very active and engaged on issues related to health care, and he responded very positively to the presentations and the tour. He was an adjunct professor of Management at Vanderbilt’s Owen Graduate School of Management and thus is familiar with the academic environment and the importance of federal funding for research. A great entrée for future interactions is that he had not known the work of Murphy and Topol, two economists from the University of Chicago who did an economic analysis of the impact of biomedical research on the American economy.

Future meetings are planned with Rep. Bart Gordon (D-TN), chairman of the House Committee on Science and Technology, and with Rep. Marsha Blackburn (R-TN). Blackburn is a member of the prestigious Energy & Commerce Committee, one of the most powerful committees in the House of Representatives, with oversight responsibility for the National Institutes of Health. We also hope to meet with Sen. Bob Corker (R-TN), newly elected this past November to the seat held by former Sen. Bill Frist.

We will be writing a “tips for activists” page that will appear in this space in coming months. In the meantime, Pete Farnham, ASBMB’s public affairs officer, will be happy to help you arrange meetings with your own members of Congress in your districts. You can visit our advocacy page for information on how to do this or contact Pete directly at pfarnham@asbmb.org for personalized advice.