

A portrait of the scientist as a young woman

Comments after the first EANM Young Investigators' Meeting

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He read the verses backwards but then they were not poetry. Then he read the flyleaf from the bottom to the top till he came to his own name. That was he: and he read down the page again. What was after the universe?

Nothing. But was there anything round the universe to show where it stopped before the nothing place began?

James Joyce: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

We can postulate that every young human being starts asking themselves questions about life and the universe whilst a teenager. Then the questions begin to become more consistent and focused on particular issues. But still, every answer generates thousands of questions and the life-long process continues.

One who asks questions: this might be one way to describe a scientist. If the scientist is young, we have a young scientist. Sounds obvious: but how young should a scientist be to fit into this definition? This is, again, a difficult question.

Anyhow, EANM decided to set up the first Young Investigators' Meeting (YIM) this year, and I had the privilege to co-chair the meeting with Prof. Adil Al-Nahhas. Adil is a really smart scientist and thanks to

his knowledge and sense of humor the meeting was a real success. The invaluable assistance of Julia Gabriel and Mirijam Hajek from the EANM Executive Secretariat made the meeting run smoothly.

Thanks to the participants and organizers, we're going to have follow-up meetings of the first group of young investigators as well as a further YIM each year from 2010 onwards. I can say everybody gained a lot of knowledge and had a great deal of fun in Vienna. You can find details of YIM 2009 in the report published in this issue of the journal.

Now let me come back to the original question: the definition of a young scientist. We decided to set the upper age limit at 38 years, which is reasonable in Europe.

As usual, however, this limit raised some questions for me. Medical training is known to be one of the longest educational paths, due to the knowledge and experience that is needed to practice medicine. Nonetheless, when we are in our mid-20s, our ideas and our will to overcome difficulties are, without doubt, much stronger. This makes me think we should strive to have doctors trained in the most effective way, without spending years teaching non-essential subjects. During these years we have to absorb an incredible amount of information, but, as has already been demonstrated in the world of information technology, we should find an algorithm, a human algorithm, able to select what is really needed to be a good doctor—and a good scientist, of course.

I understand this is quite provocative, but I strongly support the idea of having active scientists before the age of 30.

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In addition to the training, we should make every effort to actively support the younger members of our community participating in clinical and scientific research. We have to give them responsibilities and let them have the opportunity to demonstrate that they can be good scientists and good doctors, as soon as possible. This is already reality in many universities and teaching hospitals, and should be an example to follow.

EANM initiatives for young members are demonstrating that our society is enthusiastic in its support of this idea.

The other opportunity, which will play a major role in medicine, is the increasing number of women among young doctors. What we Italians call “il gentil sesso” is going to be the dominant gender in medicine in the new

millennium. Although only just over half of the participants at the YIM 2009 were women, we can forecast an increasing number of young female investigators at future meetings. Some reports have stated that women are more successful in passing university entry tests, so they form the majority of students in selective faculties like medicine. Does this eventually mean we’re going to have more brilliant doctors and scientists? I obviously don’t have the answer to that, but we are definitely leaving behind the idea of the male scientist, which was dominant in the last century.

We as nuclear physicians are well aware that a great part of the knowledge we use today is due to a great woman, Marie Curie, and we should be used to thinking of woman as scientists.