

The Wellcome Trust/DBT India Alliance

Science & Communication Workshop Report

24-26 August 2011, Hyderabad

Dr Ajay Pillai

Attendees

The India Alliance Grants Team – Drs Megha, Megha Sharma, Vid Nukala, Naresh Sharma, Madhuri Dutta, Ponnari Gottipati and Ajay Pillai.

The India Alliance meeting coordinators - Ms Saritha Vincent and Ms Chandana

Mentors - Professors Sumantra Chattarji, Dipankar Chatterji, D P Kasbekar, Anuradha Lohia, Pratima Sinha, and Shobhona Sharma.

Accord Consultants - Mr Ashish, Ms Sumathi and Ms Shilpa

Introduction

The fourth Science and Communication workshop was hosted by the India Alliance at Golkonda Resorts, Hyderabad. The workshop provided a platform for young researchers from all over India to assess and improve their communication skills in the context of a scientific career. In the two and a half day long event, participants interacted with mentors with an aim to improve their presentation and grants writing skills, and to have a better understanding about personal choices that can shape scientific careers. The workshop had participants at various stages of their research career and included PhD students, post-doctoral fellows and clinicians.

Objectives

The workshop was designed to improve the oral and power point presentation skills of researchers who were at an early stage of their career and potential applicants for the Early Career Fellowship scheme. During the workshop, scientific mentors addressed on the choices they made in their life, ethical issues in science and the Do's and Don'ts in grants writing. The workshop provided a platform for the participants to network and exchange their scientific views and also to develop their inter-personal skills. The India Alliance strongly believes that the workshop helps young researchers to plan for an independent career in research.

Events:

a) Accord Session:

The workshop commenced with Dr Megha, Programme Manger, India Alliance briefing about the objectives of the workshop. This was followed by an outstanding training session on presentation skills by Accord Consultants, Bangalore together with India Alliance staff. The forenoon session comprised of short oral presentations: each participant had to introduce him/herself. The presentation was video recorded. Based on a replay each participant was provided specific feedback. A similar session was conducted in the afternoon where the participants gave short talks on their science. In the second session participants were required to incorporate the feedback provided during the forenoon session as a result of which many displayed considerable improvements in their presentation skills. The Accord Team took extreme care in including many interactive sessions and creative discussions throughout the day with the goal to strengthen the presentation skills, and to remove personal inhibitions which prevent effective

communication. They wrapped up their session with an effective practical training in modulating voice, which was accepted with lot of applause by the participants. The Accord event was rated the best event in the entire workshop next to the grants writing session conducted by scientists from all over India.

b) Learning from Choices and Grants writing:

The next day commenced with Prof Lohia, CEO, India Alliance briefing the students about the remit and mandate of the organization. She reiterated the need for women to seriously consider science as one of their career options and requested men to support them. This was followed by “Learning from choices” session where the mentors discussed the choices they made in their life to become established independent scientists in India. Mentors encouraged participants to keep abreast with developments in science and advised them regarding choices they could consider under the several real life situations brought up by the participants. The event went through many light and tense moments when many participants opened up and discussed the personal choices they want to make in their scientific career, and difficulties involved in making the right decision. This session reiterated to the India Alliance that “Learning from Choices” session is an indispensable part of our future workshops. This was followed with mentors providing invaluable tips in how to write grants. Every proposal submitted by the participant was thoroughly analyzed and critically evaluated. This grant-evaluation session was judged the best by the participants.

c) Ethics in Research

In the afternoon, Prof Anuradha Lohia gave a presentation on ethics and its necessity in Science. She discussed some true life stories of great scientists who turned out to be unethical for petty reasons. The importance of keeping lab notebooks, handling difficult situations with colleagues in the lab, tackling tough mentors etc were questions opened for debate. This was followed by a presentation by Dr D P Kasbekar on research integrity and ethics in research publications.

d) Powerpointlessness:

The last day of the workshop was entirely led by the India Alliance team. Dr Ponnari Gottipati led the Power pointlessness module and gave an overview of what makes an ideal power point presentation. Dr Gottipati scrolled over the power point slides submitted by the participants as a part of the workshop assignment and discussed subtle errors observed during the making of a slide. The presentation of data and figures, judicious use of figure legends, selection of fonts, choosing colors, deciding on layouts, importance of animation etc were discussed in detail and this programme was rated excellent to outstanding by 100% of the participants.

e) Grantsmanship

Dr Vid Nukala led this session. The session was packed with questions and probably was the most interactive module in the entire workshop. The timelines involved in grants writing, issues overlooked when preparing a grants application, need for judicious planning during grants preparation etc., were discussed in detail. This was followed by a discussion on the Early Career Fellowship full application form with the participants. The session was led by Dr Ajay Pillai and the entire grants team worked in concert to answer questions and concerns raised by the participants. Dr Dutta brought in a new module to the grantsmanship with game that tested the participants knowledge of price of commonly used laboratory items. This was a fruitful exercise for the students, given the fact that the “Costing Session” demands extreme attention to minute details while submitting the India Alliance full application form.

The India Alliance staff and participants whole heartedly thanked the mentors for their time and effort in participating and making the event a huge success. The India Alliance found it a pleasure working with the “Golkonda Resorts team” in conducting this event.