

**Report of the Microbe and Organelle Activity Parlour at the British Science Festival,
September 18, 19 Birmingham 2010**

**Ann Vernallis
Biology/BMS Programmes
School of Life and Health Sciences
Aston University**

The Stand: We were allotted a 3m X 4m exhibition stand in a marquee in Centenary Square in the Centre of Birmingham. The marquee was open to the general public and entry was free. We shared a "room" of the marquee with Jaguar (racing cars) and Goodrich (flying paper airplanes). On the back wall of the stand we hung posters with simple diagrams of a bacterial cell and a eukaryotic cell and a poster crediting artistic contributors and sponsors. On the side walls of the stand, we hung photos of cells taken with microscopes by Aston staff members. The photos were mounted on thin Styrofoam and were accompanied with brief descriptions of the scientists and the cells which were photographed. The idea is that they looked halfway between art hung in a gallery and figures with legends as you would see in journal articles. On the tables we had four stations: A collection of children's books on microbiology and cell biology for browsing, an activity sheet with accompanying stickers of organelles, bespoke cookies hand decorated with a mitochondrion or the golgi apparatus, and temporary tattoos of bacteria and mitochondria. I regretted not having a microscope but moving a fancy microscope to the city centre proved difficult. The stand was staffed by a mixture of undergrads, post-grads, post-docs, and faculty. All wore T-shirts sporting a painting of mitochondria by Orda Noel, again blending art and science.

Visitor Participation: Visitors picked out their desired tattoos and/or cookie. They were then shown on the activity sheet where they could learn more about both and CRUCIALLY how to remove the tattoos if/when they wished to do so. Children take time to choose what they want and the tattoos take time to apply (30 seconds) so there was time for adults to look at the photogallery and a substantial number also looked at the children's books. We didn't count visitors but gave away 200 cookies (the first to run out), 200 sets of organelle stickers, 200 or so microbial stickers (ideal for kids if parents objected to tattoos), 350 activity sheets, and about 1000 tattoos. Most takers were families, but we also gave stickers/tattoos/activity sheets to teachers to use in their classrooms.

The short term legacy: The marquee itself was noisy. To maximally benefit, parents might need to discuss the activity sheets, stickers and cookies with their kids at home. The average child was younger than we expected so probably couldn't read the sheet on his/her own.

The longer term legacy: For the undergraduates it was a rare and treasured opportunity to interact with academics outside of the university—it boosted their feeling of belonging to Aston and to the Biology/BMS programmes. All of them really enjoyed the experience. They were also pleased with their T shirts and their use will continue to attract attention. Contributors to the photogallery were delighted to have their photos blown up and mounted and I expect to see them in hall ways, offices, and homes where they can continue to attract attention. The future of the leftover tattoos is not yet decided but I am sure that they will in time find good homes through outreach programmes.