

Looking back on the 1st ESN Virtual Conference “Future Perspectives for European neurochemistry – A young Scientist Conference”

It seems unbelievable that more than a month has already passed since the 1st ESN Virtual Conference took place. What started as an initiative to keep members engaged whilst meetings in person had to be postponed due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, resulted in 2 days fully loaded with the hard work, passion and curiosity of young scientists within and beyond Europe.

Back in October 2020, in the light of the postponement of the Saint Petersburg meeting, the ESN Council and officers decided to take a leap of faith and tasked us, the ESN Young Scientist Steering Committee (ESN-YSSC), with the organization of a virtual meeting. We found ourselves fully in charge, with the officers taking a step back, acting only as advisors, supporters and, later on, as poster judges. None of the YSSC members had done anything like this before but we took it in stride and immediately started working to put together a meeting that could be worthy of the trust the officers put in us, all the while thinking “We don’t want to mess this up!”. One thing was clear from the beginning: the full focus would be on young scientists in all sessions.

With that in mind we picked two potential plenary speakers, one for a “classic” scientific lecture (Prof. Adriano Aguzzi), and one something different, something that would be special for young scientists and that could help them in their careers, scientific communication (Dr. Maria Flora Mangano). We sent out the invites and, within a couple of days, they had both accepted. We had our plenary speakers. The game was afoot!

Plenary speakers were sorted, but no conference can stand on those alone. Time to send out a call for symposia and workshops proposals. Keeping our minds on the fact that we wanted the full focus to be on young scientists, we gave all the applicants one cardinal rule: all speakers and chairs, with one exception per session, had to be under 40. The rule was a matter of discussion and not welcomed by everyone. However, without the intention to exclude or discriminate anyone, we had to make sure that those who are normally out-competed would have a fair chance by competing with other scientists on the same level, rather than with those with higher faculty positions and more papers, so we went through with it.

We sent out the call and waited for almost two months. Then, when we had just begun to worry, young scientists from all over the world came to our rescue by submitting high quality proposals for symposia and workshops that display the diversity of topics represented in neurochemistry, allowing us to put a program together with one workshop and 5 symposia.

The program was almost complete but there was one more thing that was clear for us: we wanted a poster session! It is usually the most important part for young scientists, as it is (in most meetings) the only part where they actually get to present themselves. Whilst this would be different for our meeting, we were convinced that the more chances young scientists could have to present the better, and the more diverse the topics reflected.

By the beginning of March 2021, with two months to go we had a program and could finally open registration and poster abstract submission. What happened next went far beyond everyone’s expectations. More than 165 people registered, and 60 poster abstracts were submitted. There is no doubt that we were (and are) absolutely thrilled about this, but it certainly also brought back the feeling from the beginning: “We really don’t want to mess it up”. Especially not after so many people (speakers, chairs, poster presenters, and audience) had dedicated their time and effort to it. So, with no pressure at all we went into the final weeks of preparation. As it turns out, when

the organizers are distributed all over Europe and also have to deal with their own lab projects, putting an abstract book together and planning poster sessions takes a lot of emails!

On the 25th of May after many emails, test calls with the officers and speakers and a couple of nervous coffees we opened the zoom meeting and just started.

Our first plenary speaker, Prof. Aguzzi, opened the meeting with a talk on his ground-breaking work in prion research. Then, it was time for the young scientists to shine. Over the course of two days, they told us about how pathologies outside the brain affect the progression of Parkinson's disease, and tried to gap between experimental, computational and data sciences to disentangle astrocyte calcium activity. They gave us insights into the top-down and bottom-up controls of energy balance, and discussed about autism, epilepsy, intellectual disability and where these three pathologies meet. They talked about novel shades of neurometabolism, about optogenetics and photopharmacology, and about protein quality control in health and disease.

Before we realized it symposia and workshops were all done, and it was time for our second plenary lecture. Dr. Mangano and her fantastic team of alumni worked extremely hard to send their message in a lively, engaging and unforgettable way. Learning about scientific communication as a gift certainly brought new perspectives to the conference and was one of our many highlights.

With the last plenary lecture finished, there was only one essential thing to do: the poster session! We categorized our poster presenters by topic into 6 breakout rooms and allowed all of them to run us through their posters in 5 minutes and, one hour and a half later, it was already time for the concluding remarks and for a surprise for the 6 best poster presenters and for all the speakers of the workshop and symposia. They were all invited to contribute, with original research papers and reviews, to a special issue of the Journal of Molecular Neuroscience!

After a new experience there are always things to learn, decisions that one might take differently next time. There are also things to celebrate and to be proud of. In our case, these are the speakers and poster presenters, who all gave amazing and outstanding talks, and everyone who asked a question, everyone who listened and contributed. Last but not least, we also celebrated the fact that no one had a major network crash mid presentation. We could include people from overseas and all parts of Europe, who would have been unlikely to come together under the given circumstances, despite the fact that there was no free catering!

Nevertheless, it has to be said that right after we closed the conference it certainly felt like time for a drink with everyone. It felt like gathering your colleagues and new friends you have made during the conference and explore bars and restaurants of a new city, which is one of the reasons why we are looking forward to see you all in person in St. Petersburg in 2022!

ESN-YSSC