

## An interview with Elisabeth Knust: President of the German Society for Developmental Biology



Every two years, the German Society for Developmental Biology (GfE – Gesellschaft für Entwicklungsbiologie) holds a scientific meeting for their members. This year, from 23 to 26 March, their meeting was held in Dresden, jointly with the Japanese Society of Developmental Biologists (JSDB). At this meeting, we sat down with GfE President Elisabeth Knust to learn more about her and about the society's role in connecting developmental biologists in Germany.

### What is your lab working on?

My lab is working on major questions in cell polarity, in particular on the elucidation of the mechanisms that maintain cell polarity, and we are concentrating specifically on polarity in epithelial cells. Some years ago, we identified what is now called the Crumbs complex. We're now trying to understand how this complex controls cell polarity. For the past few years we have also been working on photoreceptor cells. We know that the Crumbs complex is involved in the function and development of these cells by

controlling shape and morphogenesis. Flies that do not have Crumbs in their photoreceptor cells become blind when they're exposed to constant light, a phenotype reminiscent of a human disease, retinitis pigmentosa 12. Indeed, some of these patients have mutations in one of the homologues of the Crumbs gene, *CRB1*. Given these different aspects of the function of Crumbs – control of cell polarity, control of cell morphogenesis and prevention of light-dependent degeneration – we are asking what the complex is doing at a cell biological level. I expect that the function is the same but that the readout of each cell is slightly different. However, this is what we have to figure out.

### You're also the current President of the GfE. How long have you been president of the society?

I've been president since 2010 and presidency is always a two-year period. The main task of the President is to organise the meeting, which we are currently holding here in Dresden. The society also runs the GfE school, a symposium particularly for young scientists – graduate students, postdocs – to present their work. This school also takes place every other year and is organised by Ulrich Nauber, the treasurer of the society, and one or two additional scientists, who determine the topic.

### Is the GfE school just open to members or can anyone attend?

In principle, anyone can attend. For GfE members, at least for member students, participation and accommodation is free. The invited speakers also get free accommodation but they are supposed to pay for their travel themselves. I think that's a good way to keep this meeting affordable while still getting good scientists to present their work. But a major function of this GfE school is also to provide the opportunity for students and postdocs to present their own work.

### How old is the society?

The society was founded in 1975 with the goal of fostering developmental biology in

Germany. Initially, it was meant to be the society for all German-speaking countries, including Austria and Switzerland, but the number of members in Austria and Switzerland has gone down with time: currently there are only eleven members from these countries.

### When the society was founded in 1975, was that just for West Germany at the time?

Yes, it was only for West Germany, because at that time everything was separated. After the unification of East and West Germany, it was not difficult to merge GfE membership because there was very little developmental biology in the eastern part of Germany. There was one *Drosophila* group in Halle – the group of Gunter Reuter, whose work on position-effect variegation made major contributions to what is now known as epigenetic regulation of chromatin. Today, only about 12% of the members come from the former east, e.g. from Dresden, Berlin, Halle and Rostock.

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### How many members does the society have?

Currently, we have 410 members. We just discussed this in our members meeting today. We've had a slight increase in memberships in the last two or three years. I would not say that this is a trend yet, but it is a promising sign.

### This meeting is a joint meeting with the Japanese society. How did that come about?

The president of the Japanese society, Kiyoo Agata, participated in our meeting two years ago and asked if we were interested in

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holding a joint meeting. We had a discussion with all the other members and collectively decided that we should hold this current meeting in Dresden together with the JSDB. Now that the meeting is in progress, I think it's a very exciting meeting and it's great to have our Japanese colleagues here, who came to Dresden despite all the problems that they are now facing in their country after the earthquake.

**Do you have any plans for collaborations with other societies in the future?**

The Spanish and French societies have both expressed interest in a joint meeting. But I forwarded their requests to the next President, Jochen Wittbrodt, because he will be in charge of the next meeting. We can't have meetings with everyone at once, unfortunately, but he may decide with whom to join for the next meeting. There is also an ongoing discussion about holding the next meeting together with the German Society for Cell Biology, because developmental and cell biology are always very closely linked. In the UK, it's always a joint meeting. I have been to the British Cell and Developmental Biology meeting a few times and I really like this combination

because there's so much overlap. Also, here, at the current meeting in Dresden, a lot of cell biology is being presented. So, yes, in principle I think the society is very open to having a new joint meeting.

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**Were your meetings always in English or did you change it to accommodate collaboration?**

I remember when I went to my first meeting in the 1980s, the meeting was in German. Then, gradually, some of the posters were in English but it took a while for English to become the main language of the meeting. There was a long discussion: why should we not use our own language? But as more foreigners were invited to give talks, the language gradually changed to English. For a few years now it has been completely in English and there's no discussion about it whatsoever. I also think that it's very good for students and postdocs

to get early practice talking about their work in English.

**What would you like to see the society achieve in the next few years?**

We had a discussion just today in our membership assembly. There is currently an idea to better organise all biologists in this country. We have quite a number of societies for biologists: developmental biologists, cell biologists, geneticists, zoologists, etc. – they all have their own society. By contrast, chemists or physicists each have just one society with thousands of members. There are many issues important to all biologists that have to be negotiated with politicians, for example, and a small society like ours, with only about four hundred members, does not have a lot of say. The VBIO (Verband Biologie, Biowissenschaften und Biomedizin) aims to encompass some of the smaller societies under one roof, allowing them to speak with a single voice. According to this concept, our society will still maintain its identity and will still organise a meeting for developmental biologists, but at the same time it will be in closer contact with other societies under the umbrella of VBIO. At least, that's what I hope.