

Travellers' tales

Providing grants to attend scientific meetings



Jef Pinxteren, of the Department of Immunology at the University of Gent, Belgium, received a Travel Grant from the Biochemical Society to attend a scientific meeting on stem cells in Keystone, CO, USA.

“What was particularly good about the conference was that the topic was relatively focused, and so a lot of the best people in the field were at the meeting,” he says. “The way Keystone meetings are set up, there is ample time to talk to the speakers and their colleagues. There were no talks in the afternoon, so that you could go skiing without having to miss out on anything.”

Jef's main research effort at the moment goes to the characterization of the so-called ‘multipotent adult progenitor cells’ (MAPCs). These cells were first described by Catherine Verfaillie (Stem Cell Institute, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis) and can be isolated from bone marrow. One of the aims is to find a marker for these cells, but even more important would be defining the conditions for stable culturing. MAPCs are reported to have almost the same potential as embryonic stem cells, but without a number of disadvantages, e.g. teratogenic potential.

“On the way to the conference, I stopped by in Chapel Hill to meet my former collaborators. I gave a short talk on the MAPC topic and then travelled on to Birmingham [AL], where I spent a few days with friends that I made while working at UAB in the years 1999–2000. I eventually reached Keystone by way of Denver.”

At the Keystone conference, he presented a poster on ‘A straightforward method to generate multipotent adult progenitor cells (MAPCs) from human bone marrow’ (with the Biochemical Society sponsor sticker attached, as he points out).

The poster gave details of work he has done with colleagues from the University of Gent. They isolated human MAPCs of seemingly equivalent quality through seeding the total mononuclear fraction on fibronectin-coated culture plastic. The cells were seeded at high density (0.5–1.5 million/cm²) in low-serum (2%) MAPC growth medium. Loose cells were removed after 24 hours, and the medium was refreshed. After 48–72 hours, regions of intense cell proliferation (± 5 /cm²) can be observed. These cells were harvested, subcloned and subsequently cultured. MAPC characteristics were compared with matching cells isolated via depletion. These cells were morphologically indistinguishable and had similar differentiation potential.

The Travel Grant helped pay for the flights and the lodging. “Keystone meetings are expensive,” says Jef, “because they are held in beautiful locations (mostly in the Rocky Mountains), and all the lodging facilities are first class. I’d like to thank the Biochemical Society for making it possible.”

Guidelines for Applications

The rules and regulations for applying for a Travel Grant are strict and can be viewed in full at www.biochemistry.org where you can also obtain an application form. The main points are listed here for your information:

1. The Travel Grants Committee meets six times a year with closing dates for applications of 1st January, 1st March, 1st May, 1st July, 1st September and 1st November. Applications received after these closing dates will not be considered. Furthermore, applications should be for meetings or visits which take place at least one month after a particular closing date.
2. One original plus four photocopies of a completed application with enclosures should be submitted by post to Alison McWhinnie, Assistant Director, Personnel and Administration, The Biochemical Society, 59 Portland Place, London W1B 1QW. All parts of the form should be completed – if necessary writing “not applicable” for some sections. Applicants must be able to demonstrate that the most cost-effective form of transport and accommodation is to be utilized. Faxed and e-mail applications will not be accepted.
3. New members may apply for their first Travel Grant after they have been a member of the British Biochemical Society for 1 year by the relevant closing date, although applicants will not be eligible if they have been awarded a Student Travel Grant within the last year. Furthermore, applicants will not be eligible if they have been awarded a Travel Grant from the Society during the previous 2 years.
4. Applications which do not comply with the full set of guidelines will not be considered.