

The Mini-symposium on Cell Biology - 2018

What an event it has been! All the organizing efforts culminated in the 4th Mini-Symposium on Cell Biology held on 18th and 19th of July, 2018: a symposium held by the students, for the students. Hosted as an annual event at the National Centre for Cell Science (NCCS), this gives graduate students an opportunity to interact with people from different research backgrounds, not to mention that it tests and helps hone their management and social skills as well. As is tradition, we invited distinguished speakers from leading academic institutions, which was met with their enthusiastic willingness to participate, as always.

The symposium was kick started with a stimulating talk by Dr. Soman Abraham from Duke-NUS. As he rightly predicted, his talk on bacterial infections in the bladder ensured that we wouldn't think of the bladder the same way when we use the restroom again! This was followed by talks by other eminent scientists and graduate students. Prof. M. K. Mathew, from the National Centre for Biological Sciences, Bengaluru, held our attention with his talk on the Voltage-Dependent Anion Channel (VDAC). He revealed how this protein, in conjunction with other proteins, can tip the survival-death balance of a cell in disease conditions. From the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, Dr. Annapoorni Rangarajan opened our eyes to the strategies that cancer cells might be employing to avoid death due to detachment from the extracellular matrix, thereby establishing metastasis. Her lab has identified that the interplay of two proteins, AMPK and Akt, confers resistance to such cell death, termed as anoikis. Our panel of speakers also included a young scientist, Dr. Niti Kumar, from the Central Drug Research Institute, Lucknow. Her enthusiasm won the audience over, as she talked about the metastable sensors that her lab has developed to understand protein homeostasis in different sub-cellular compartments.

This year we introduced a new segment to the symposium, where we invited two entrepreneurs to remind the students that if academia is not their cup of tea, there are other avenues! Ms. Veena Moktali, Co-founder of Periwinkle Technologies, gave an overview of the innovative way this company has integrated hardware and software components to manufacture a device that can non-invasively scan for neoplastic cells in certain cancers like cervical cancers. Working on a completely different idea, Ms. Sri Sailaja Nori, another women entrepreneur, talked about Sea6 Energy, a company she Co-founded. Sea6 Energy scientifically cultivates a type of seaweed which harvests the sun's energy, utilizing the vast shorelines of India. The biomass is then used for biofuels, plant growth stimulants, plant defence products and other bio-renewable products. Inviting such enterprising speakers made us realise that while entrepreneurship is an exciting path, it is one riddled with many risks, and requires a lot of patience, perseverance, passion and hard work! Interacting with all the speakers taught us that collaborating and talking openly about our achievements as well as our problems will help us succeed in our career.

Being a student symposium, this event would have been incomplete without the students playing a major role. Therefore, senior graduate students were invited to give oral presentations about their work. Rucha Sarwade, Mohsina Khan and Shikha Nag each

passionately talked about their research, with Rucha winning the 1st prize for her presentation. Everyone was further treated to a vast array of posters displayed by the students on the first day of the symposium. The invited speakers in particular were impressed with the enthusiasm with which the students presented their posters. The first prize for the posters was given to Rutuja Kuhiker, with the second place going to Neha Gupta. However, in my opinion, the best segment of the entire event was the "Elevator Pitch" competition, another new addition to this year's symposium. This challenged the students to test their skills at summarizing their research in 3 minutes, in layman's terms. Yashika Agrawal, Indersen Magre, Samruddhi Zende and Shehnaz Bano Siddiqui rose beautifully to the occasion and captivated the audience with their short talks, with Yashika taking the first place. The desire expressed by everyone for more elevator pitches may lead to this segment assuming a bigger role in subsequent symposia.

All in all, the entire symposium was fun, well received and quite relaxed, giving ample opportunity for everyone to interact, something the students happily grabbed. We offer our best wishes to the next organizing committee for an even grander 5th Mini-symposium!

Kruthika Iyer