

Scientific Liaison and Information Services

W.H. Macfarlane Smith

We live in a world today where the pace of scientific advance has never been faster. The public awareness of science is greater than ever before but, equally, the concerns about scientific developments exceed anything known in the past. Certainly, the demand for information seems to be almost insatiable, much of this fuelled by the concerns following the BSE problems in cattle and the resulting CJD outbreak in Man. The issue of the genetic modification (GM) of crops ties up ever more of the Unit's time in an endeavour to explain the real and potential advantages of the new technology and to counter the insidious and frequently erroneous propaganda of the anti-GM pressure groups. Through the Institute's participation in events at the local Botanic Gardens, at 'Sensation' (the new Dundee Science Centre), at the Haddington Science Festival, the National Garden Show, the Edinburgh International Science Festival, and our own Open Days, large numbers of people have been able to see for themselves, the true nature of SCRI's research. Of equal importance, they have been able to ask questions of well-informed staff involved with the research and to have a proper debate on the pros and cons of biotechnology and other new scientific and technological developments. Participation in radio and television programmes, and one-on-one press interviews have increased markedly and have helped again to raise public awareness of the Institute's work. However, there is still a section of the media which is more concerned with confrontation between those of different views than with making the effort to inform better the large numbers of non-scientists in the UK. A considerable number of talks have been given to agricultural discussion groups, some numbering well in excess of 100 members, and to other interested organisations, including the W.R.I., Women's Graduate groups in Universities, Rotary and Probus – it would seem that all ages and sectors of society are interested. It is also clear that everyone attending these presentations is concerned to understand the biological revolution which is taking place and to be assured that the benefits will be as much available to the UK as to other countries in the World. It is particularly important that young people should understand the issues. To this end, parties from schools, colleges and universities have been welcomed at SCRI. Staff have also travelled to give one-off talks to such institutions and have delivered papers

on new developments in biotechnology and the genetic modification of crops, at a range of conferences. Knowledge of the wide range of research in the Institute has become increasingly important in undergraduate teaching. As well as receiving our regular visitors from the Universities of Aberdeen, Abertay, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Heriot Watt, Newcastle, Paisley, St Andrews and Strathclyde, staff now participate in teaching parts of the courses at some of the above.

The collaborative effort with MRS to bring to SCRI those individuals and organisations who might be interested in commercial links, has continued and been expanded. It has also been a pleasure to see a further increase in visitors from overseas including Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, Ukraine and the USA.

Political interest in the work of SCRI has increased and all the major political parties have visited in recent times. It was a particular pleasure to welcome on two occasions, Mr John Home Robertson, Deputy Minister of the Scottish Executive Rural Affairs Department. His first visit was part of a familiarisation exercise on taking responsibility for the SABRI's.



The second was to undertake the official opening of the new £1.6 million Research Glasshouse (see page 48) and other refurbished offices and laboratories.

The various groups within Information Services have again had a busy and productive year. The demands

on Visual Aids to provide a wide range of services in photography and graphics continue to increase and output has again been raised. A major constraint on further increases will be the quality and capacity of the specialised equipment. The high quality of production for publications, brochures, conferences and public events, such as the Dundee Millennium Exhibition, has attracted much favourable comment. It was a particular pleasure to see these skills recognised by the award of a Bronze Medal at the National Garden Show.

The Library has continued the process of reviewing its accessions and holdings. The re-location of little used stock to a Library Annex has now been completed. Pressures on all public-sector bodies to ensure total compliance with the Copyright laws continue to increase. Material improvements to the Library are being made with the replacement of old shelving. Additional computer terminals are a part of the forward planning, as is an expansion of the office space and the provision of a ramp for disabled access. The advent of electronic journals continues to cause problems as every publisher, for the short- to medium-term, has a different method of delivery and different licence conditions. It is clear that there are to be no cost savings from moving to the electronic format, and the security and continued access to the archive are also questions that have not been answered satisfactorily. However, the advantages of the electronic delivery of content to the desktop are being exploited as far as the budget will allow. Links with the Univer-

sity of Edinburgh are likely to be discontinued and new arrangements are currently being finalised with the BBSRC for access to online databases and electronic journals.

As part of a major management re-organisation in the Institute part-way through the year, a new Unit of Information Technology was created. This will be operated by staff previously in the Unit of Bioinformatics and Information Technology and will have many of the same responsibilities. In future years, its activities will be the subject of a separate report. A major review of electronic communications, both within and outwith the Institute, showed a number of problems with the existing Local Area Network, parts of which are more than ten years old and use only Thinnest cabling. A project for the re-cabling of the Institute to Twisted Pair cable standard, has now been drawn up and costed. It is hoped to proceed with this in the coming year.

The importance of Health and Safety in all places of work continues to grow and, as always, the Institute accords such matters a very high priority. Accordingly, a separate report is presented this year. The Institute's policy on Health and Safety is printed at the front of this year's Annual Report.

The Institute's Internet pages have been revised and expanded while increasing use of the Intranet is being made both for routine administrative purposes and to keep staff fully informed of management processes and changes.