

Secondary school students representing all of the provinces of Ireland participated in the final of the Debating Science Issues (DSI) competition on 2 April 2009 at the Science Gallery in Trinity College Dublin. After several closely contested debates from four teams representing Connaught, Ulster, Leinster and Munster, St. Mary's Secondary School of Macroom, Co. Cork emerged as the All-Ireland winners.



The All-Ireland Final revolved around the motion that 'Opposing evidence-based theories such as evolution damages all science'. Other finalists included St. Dominic's High School, Santa Sabina, Sutton, Belfast High School, Belfast City, and St. Attracta's Community School, Tubbercurry, Co. Sligo.

"This collaborative approach to education and outreach is key to encouraging young people to consider career opportunities in science and engineering as



Ireland's future economic success is dependent on having this highly skilled workforce," commented Dr. Annie Curtis, Scientific Programme Manager of Science Foundation Ireland, a member of the DSI judging panel. Lorcan O'Raghallaigh of Discover Science & Engineering, Dr. John Denari of IRCSET, Bridget Kelly of CLARITY at UCD, Dr. Tom Ziessen, Public Engagement Advisor of the Wellcome Trust, Greg Smith of NUI, Maynooth, Emily de Grae of the Irish Council for Bioethics, Dr. Jennifer Ralph from SFI and Dr. Charlotte Holland of Dublin City University were also judges at the Debating Science Issues Final.



All teachers and judges involved deserve a sincere thank you for making this worthwhile competition an All-Ireland success for science. Everyone at REMEDI, especially Danielle Nicholson deserves a big thank you for making the competition happen. This would not have been possible without the generous sponsorship and support of the Wellcome Trust.



The Wellcome Trust is an independent charity funding research to improve human and animal health. Established in 1936 and with an endowment of around £13 billion, it is the UK's largest non-governmental source of funds for biomedical research.



DEBATING SCIENCE ISSUES

September 2009

"The students had to think deeply about the topics and appreciate the other side's views."

Teacher comment

Open to senior cycle students in secondary schools across Ireland and Northern Ireland, Debating Science Issues (DSI) is a great opportunity for students to expand and hone their communication, research and scientific skills. As a precursor to the debate competition, each school involved avails of a 3-hour workshop on one of the five debate topics: genetically modified foods, health & self-testing, stem cell research, nanotechnology, and vaccinations. The bioethical workshop kick-starts the research, and prepares the students for the first round of debates. From there, the debating motions circulate so that all students debate on and learn an array of controversial, topical science issues.

DSI is a dynamic debating competition inviting young people to engage in debate on the cultural, societal and ethical implications of advances in biomedical science. Funded by the Wellcome Trust, the debating competition is coordinated by REMEDI, the Regenerative Medicine Institute at NUI, Galway, a Science Foundation Ireland Centre for Science, Engineering and Technology (CSET) in conjunction with science research and discovery centres throughout Ireland and Northern Ireland. In 2009, over four hundred students at more than thirty schools engaged in biomedical workshops. Three hundred students went on to form debate teams and compete. Contingent upon funding, the project has been expanded to incorporate more schools, students, research centres and geographic regions for 2009-2010.



Connaught

The Western region was co-ordinated by REMEDI, a Science Foundation Ireland and industry-funded research centre located at NUI, in Galway. Scientists and doctors at REMEDI are working together combining the technologies of gene therapy and adult stem cell therapy to repair and replace tissues damaged by heart disease, arthritis and neurological disease.

The Connaught region was expanded in the wider delivery of biomedical, bioethical workshops to include schools in counties Roscommon and Sligo this year. A cross-curricular approach to debate preparation was exhibited in many of the schools involved. English teachers and science teachers worked closely together to develop biomedical science knowledge and enhance communication skills in their students.

REMEDI sincerely thanks the teachers and judges involved in the provincial heats. Congratulations and job well-done to Ciara O'Shea and her TY students at St. Attracta's Community School of Tubbercurry, Co. Sligo. They won three provincial heats debating the procurement and use of embryonic stem cells, the health benefits of genetically modified foods and whole population immunisation. St. Attracta's team went on to represent Connaught in the All-Ireland Finals in Dublin!

For information for schools in Connaught contact:
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Munster

The Munster regional section of DSI was coordinated by the SFI-funded Alimentary Pharmabiotic Centre (APC) and Tyndall National Institute. Schools received a three hour workshop in preparation for the first round of the competition. The APC delivered workshops about Genetically Modified Food to North Presentation, St Vincent's Secondary School, St Goban's Bantry, Scoil Phobail Beara, Presentation Secondary Ballyphehane and St Aloysius. Tyndall delivered workshops on Nanotechnology to Christian Brothers School Charleville, St. Vincent's Secondary School, Scoil Mhuire, Presentation Brothers College, St. Mary's Secondary School Macroom, Ballincollig Community School and St. Mary's Secondary School Mallow.

St. Mary's Secondary School Macroom defeated a strong side from St Goban's Bantry in the Munster Regional Final debating the ethics of self-testing in healthcare, before going on to win the All Ireland final. It was evident from the high standard of the debates that all the teams committed a significant amount of time and effort into preparing, and this proved to be the winning formula for the triumphant students from St. Mary's Macroom.

We are very grateful to all the teachers and judges for the regional heats, semi-finals and Munster Regional Final.

For information for schools in Munster contact:
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“DSI gave me an idea of scientists’ work and importance.”

Student comment



Ulster

W5 is delighted to have been involved in Debating Science Issues 2008/2009. Four schools put up stiff competition in the Ulster heats, debating the ethics of Stem Cell Research. Antrim Grammar, Ballyclare High, Belfast High and Omagh Academy were our contenders. The margins of victory were narrow and the standard of debating was very high. Antrim Grammar and Belfast High progressed to the Ulster Final to debate Vaccination Policy. Both teams slugged it out in a tightly contested clash with Belfast High emerging victorious. This time last year this result was reversed so there was a lot at stake in this tie.

It was obvious to all involved the amount of time and energy the pupils had invested in the programme. All of the teams arrived with well-prepared arguments and were ready to put up a fight but it was the exceptional ability of the Belfast High team to react and respond to tough questions from the judges that saw them through in the end. It was great to see the team from Belfast High going all the way to the national finals where they came away with a well deserved second place overall.

The teachers involved were enthused by the combination of enhancing biomedical science knowledge and the opportunity to develop pupil communication skills. Mr Ian Campbell, Head of Biology at Belfast High, commented on how the competition proved a great way of encouraging young people to take on an active scientific role and engage with contemporary research.

For information for schools in Ulster contact:
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Leinster

The Leinster regional trophy and the coveted place in the national finals was hotly contested by eight schools: De la Salle College Dundalk, Castleblayney College Monaghan, Loreto Balbriggan, Santa Sabina Sutton, St. Patrick's, Navan, St. Aidans Whitehall, Dublin St. Paul's Brunswick St Dublin and St. Oliver's, Old Castle, Meath.

Education & Outreach personnel from the Biomedical Diagnostics Institute (BDI), an SFI-funded CSET centre and the Royal College of Surgeons visited each school to deliver a workshop on the first motion, health & self-testing, to introduce students to the motion and the competition in general. The carefully researched and professionally delivered arguments put forward by Santa Sabina Sutton and St. Paul's CBS, Brunswick Street propelled them through the first two rounds to the regional final where, despite tough competition, the girls from Santa Sabina Sutton claimed a well deserved place in the national finals.

Congratulations to all the students involved in the Leinster heats for their enthusiasm, commitment and talent which were apparent throughout the competition. The future of science in Leinster certainly looks bright!

For information for schools in Leinster contact:
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“This has made science more interesting and less absolute.”

Student comment

