

In which I became a conference blogger

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The 20th International Congress of Genetics started in Berlin yesterday. This is the first time that I attend a meeting as a science blogger. An interesting experience since you look at the talks from a different perspective and you have to try to cover topics that are of general interest but often not really your area of expertise.

The conference started yesterday afternoon with a press conference with Rudi Balling, Alfred Nordheim, Mario Capecchi, Christiane Nüsslein-Volhard, Oliver Smithies and Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker. The International Congress of Genetics takes place every 5 years, but wasn't held in Germany since 1927. The main reason for this is the horrible crimes that were done between 1933 and 1945 in the name of "Eugenics" [1]. This dark history of Genetics in Germany was also discussed at the press conference. On July 14 there will be a special announcement by the German Society for Human Genetics (GfH), as this is the 75th anniversary of a German law that allowed the sterilization of people with "genetic" diseases against their will. The GfH will say that they deeply regret the behavior of German geneticists during that time. This is a topic that has special meaning to me, since one of the leading German geneticists involved was Ottmar von Verschuer who is a cousin of my great-grandmother. The German Research Foundation (DFG) did extensive research on the involvement of the Kaiser-Wilhelm Society (which became the DFG after 1945) in the crimes committed between 1933 and 1945 in the beginning of this century (see this Nature News article).

Another topic debated in the press conference was the use of genetics to treat patients, more specifically gene therapy and stem cells. Mario Capecchi and others stressed that ethical decisions on these issues should be done by society and that the scientists would only provide the tools. Oliver Smithies pointed out that we should make the clear distinction between somatic gene therapy and gene therapy targeting the germline, and that the latter approach would be not only risky but in most cases unnecessary.

The expectations for the conference were nicely summarized by Oliver Smithies, who said that science happens in unexpected jumps, and that these jumps are often produced by people from whom you don't expect it.

fn1. I previously blogged about how the journal Nature was banned in Germany 70 years ago.