

Science and technology

Soundbites

Let's get physical

"Why, they say, should we spend so much money studying stuff that existed for only 10^{-15} seconds or — God help us — 10^{-45} seconds after the Big Bang?"

John Hassard, Dick Learner and David Colling, Imperial College. *Physics World*

High-pitched whine

"It is up to all of us to make our contribution to improving the public perception of our profession. The best way is to stop moaning. Engineers have higher average salaries, higher representation in top jobs and lower unemployment than many believe."

Malcolm Shirley, director general, Engineering Council. *Materials World*

Weather in the streets

"Almost any short-term climatic phenomenon, can be explained as something that falls within the enormous range of natural climatic variability. Until this year. Even before 1998 comes to a close, it is clear that this year is one for the meteorological record books."

Christopher Flavin, vice-president of the World Watch Institute. *WorldWatch*

Cluck on a mouse

"Q: Explain why a newborn mouse will accept a skin graft from another mouse while an older mouse will not. A: The newborn mouse is more open-minded whereas the older mouse could be more set in its ways and less willing to accept advances in science."

Exam howlers, by Anon. *The Biologist*

Compiled by Tim Radford

Drinking in science



Café Scientifique: Oliver Sacks (second left) on chemistry, beside his host, Duncan Dallas

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Richard Lea meets the man who mistook his café for a forum for scientific discussion

IT'S A WET Monday night in Chapel Allerton, a village long swallowed by Leeds but which still manages to retain an atmosphere all its own. The café, In Vino Veritas, is packed to bursting point. The attraction is not a super-cheap happy hour nor a local derby darts match, but a discussion on chemistry.

The speaker is Oliver Sacks, the neurologist, author of such books as *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat*, and the presenter of the BBC series, *The Mind Traveller*.

He is talking about how he lost the love of chemistry that his "Uncle Tungsten" (because the uncle worked in a tungsten factory) helped to foster at school, and how he rediscovered this love in later life. People are struggling to get in to hear him and some are turned away at the door.

Sacks is at the café because, twice a month, In Vino Veritas becomes the Café Scientifique, an informal gathering where the audience can have a coffee or a bottle of wine, listen to first-class thinkers discuss their subjects, and join in the discussion if the mood takes them. It's almost the scientific equivalent of a folk club.

It is the creation of Duncan Dallas, head of an independent TV company, XYTV. He read chemistry and the history and philosophy of science at Oxford. In 1974, he produced a documentary on Sacks's book, *Awakenings* (long before the

Robin Williams film).

This summer he was reading the obituary of Marc Sautet who started the Café Philosophique in Paris and wondered if a scientific version might work in England. At the same time he was staring out of his office window at the local watering hole, In Vino Veritas, and the Café Scientifique was born.

"Science is real," he says. "People are both fascinated and slightly alarmed by science, especially the life sciences, and are eager not to be talked at, but to enter into some kind of dialogue."

SACKS is just one of a number of high-powered speakers to pass through. Each gives a short talk "to focus the discussion" and then it's open to all comers. Alan Sokal, the physics professor who upset academia with his spoof on post-modernism and quantum physics, came to talk about the bankruptcy of continental philosophy. Helena Cronin, visiting fellow at the LSE, discussed

Oliver Sacks's personal tale provoked a debate on why chemistry is no longer sexy

how feminism should respond to Darwinism.

Dallas says the discussions work on two levels. "A lot of this stuff is very interesting. To take it out of an academic context and put it into a café makes an enjoyable evening. But on another level, it is very necessary to talk about these things. A lot of them are both wonderful and rather alarming. Because they're about us, people need to become involved. Science is too important to be left to the scientists."

Andrew Carter, a regular at the café, says, "It's good to be able to interact. People can get really cross."

Dallas hopes the idea could spread. Visitors are talking of setting up Cafés Scientifiques in Sheffield and Cambridge.

Sacks is impressed. "The public is underrated," he says. "Science needs to engage with people, not just lecture them."

People were certainly engaged. Sacks's personal tale provoked a debate on why chemistry is no longer sexy. When Capitalism got the blame, the discussion was moved quickly on by Dallas: "That's a subject for the Café Politique," he said.

The next meeting of the Café Scientifique is at 7.30pm on Monday November 16 when Sir John Maddox, the former editor of *Nature*, will be talking about the future of science. Call 01132 371199 for more information.