

Don't be misled by citation figures! (5)

## The Lucky Punch

It's ten years now since the faculty appointed Svetlana Popova as Director of the Neurobiology Department. It was quite a surprise at the time because her projects were running... erm ... modestly, to put it kindly and that didn't change during the first years of her directorship. Nothing really exciting stood out. The main result of her team's efforts was an armada of antibodies against proteins in synaptic membranes.

However, four years ago one of those antibodies landed a lucky punch for her. For reasons she's never really understood to this day, one of her PhD students had treated brain slices from early mouse embryos with that particular antibody. And where did the subsequent antibody-staining concentrate? Exactly at the axonal growth cones of developing neurons.

At first, however, there was harsh disappointment. The protein recognised by the antibody had already been published a couple of months earlier. A US-team from Stanford University led by Marc Bolton-Smith had characterised the protein in *Cell* as a key regulator of axonal pathfinding. Hence Popova *et al.* were too late to make a really big story out of their antibody studies and it finally appeared in the *Journal of Immunological Methods*.



A couple of weeks later Marc Bolton-Smith phoned Svetlana out of the blue. He kindly asked her if she could provide him with a sample of her antibody in order to perform a certain series of experiments, jovially adding that his people hadn't yet succeeded in producing their own reasonable antibodies! "It's indeed such a mess with those membrane proteins, I'm really full of admiration for how you managed this difficult task", the famous Bolton-Smith purred down the phone.

In return he promised that he would most definitely include her in the author's list of every paper describing results obtained with her antibody.

Svetlana, altruistic scientist as she was, sent off the antibody. It worked fantastically. In the ensuing years Bolton-Smith *et al.* published a dozen papers including results obtained with Svetlana's antibody. More or less the same happened with the projects of ten or so more researchers who had also asked Svetlana for antibody samples, following Bolton-Smith's phone call. Also as promised she was co-author on all those wonderful papers.

In those days axonal pathfinding was a very hot topic. Those who weren't particular experts were led to believe that Svetlana was one of the top researchers in the field because her name was on many of the most highly-cited papers about axonal pathfinding – albeit always somewhere in the middle of the authors list.

However, the sad irony of the story is that she is still trying to characterise synaptic membrane proteins in her institute, continuing to be just as "modestly" successful as ever before.

RALF NEUMANN

(All characters, names and stories in this column are fictitious and are used for the purposes of comment and parody alone. Any similarity to real people and places is a coincidence. It is intended, however, to come as close as possible to reality.)

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