

Day in the life

...of a Christmas lecturer

by Nancy Rothwell



It's rare for me to find two working days that are the same or even similar. They usually start early, finish later than I'd planned and are never long enough to get everything done. Quite often I will be away at a meeting, visiting a company or giving a seminar somewhere in the UK or abroad. Even in Manchester, my day is usually a varied mix of research, administration and teaching, although more recently it's been a pleasure to have a bit more time for research. It's this variety (sometimes not knowing what each day will bring) that is one of the reasons that I can't imagine a more interesting and exciting job.

Sometimes though, life can seem just a bit too varied and challenging. Never more so than on a cold Monday at about this time in December last year. Most Monday mornings I'm rudely awoken from a deep sleep by the alarm at 5.45 am. On this particular Monday I was wide awake by 4.00 am, having eventually fallen asleep well after 1.00 am the night before. I leapt out of bed in total darkness with a feeling of pending doom. A few moments of synaptic organization reminded me why — this was the first of 10 days I would spend rehearsing, delivering and recording the Royal Institution Christmas Lectures for the BBC.

Each of the five one-hour lectures (on my chosen topic of homeostasis, 'Staying Alive: the Body in Balance') would be rehearsed, planned and perfected (at least that was the plan) on one day. We would have a 'dress rehearsal' the following morning, and BBC TV cameras would record the delivery to 400 children in the afternoon. Several months earlier, during the planning and discussions for the lectures, I had been quite bewildered by, and had even objected to, what seemed to be such extensive rehearsal for a one-hour lecture. I was soon to be proven very wrong.

After learning that room service in my hotel didn't start until 6.00 am, I made coffee, ate all the digestive biscuits they had provided, and then went through the script, demonstrations, exhibits, videos and props for lecture 1. By 8.00 am I set off to the Royal Institution, and to my first shock of the day.

The Royal Institution is a friendly, though usually rather cold, building, full of character, in one of the most elegant parts of London. By now I'd visited many times and felt comfortable there. But this wasn't the Royal Institution I knew. From the road, it was obscured by a huge BBC outside-broadcasting unit. Inside the building, lighting and sound equipment, huge cameras, miles of cable, strange boxes, crates and props, electricians, cameramen, set builders and others I couldn't identify, seemed to be everywhere. The theatre was unrecognizable, and so were most of the people. I soon learnt why they call everyone "darling" on TV sets — it is impossible to remember their names. The relief was enormous as a few friendly faces arrived: the producers Caroline and Martin, Ilya (who designed and built most of the demos) and Ros and Erinma from my lab.

I started to learn who everyone was in the team, numbering about 50, and what they did, but as bewilderment started to dwindle, my fears grew. I was told that we would spend the morning going through the whole script, section by section. We had to work out exactly where I would stand, which camera I would look at, what cue I would give for each video clip (none of which I had seen by this

time), demonstration, animal or prop, how each of these would be brought on and removed, and when I would ask for volunteers — remembering never to ask the same child twice and trying to get a varied mix of girls and boys of different ages and backgrounds. Many of the demonstrations and props were not finished, hardly any had been tested, the animals were ‘frisky’ to say the least, and we changed the script at least a dozen times during the morning.

By 2.00 pm I had probably drunk 2 litres of black coffee, eaten half a sandwich (which had been forced upon me), and had decided that this was definitely a big mistake. The afternoon was meant to be a full run through with cameras to get their positions and cues, but as we were several hours late, chaos seemed to prevail. One day’s rehearsal now seemed dreadfully inadequate. The only glimmer of hope was that everyone in the production team told me “how well we were doing” and “it’s usually much worse than this”. I suspect they lied.

Almost 12 hours after I had arrived at the Royal Institution, I was shattered. I felt we had made little progress and had about a week’s work still to do. I always seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time saying the wrong thing. After many prompts and reminders, I was starting to realize that I couldn’t just wander about and ad lib as most scientists tend to do in talks. Each section was marked up by the Director and his team for cameramen, backstage helpers, producers etc. so they would know my position, which camera I would face (or show details for ‘zoom’) and what cue I would give. I just had to remember it all as well as the script, with no autocue or prompt.

Unfortunately all this chaos and my many mistakes were filmed for a documentary about “The Making of the Christmas Lectures”, which I was later to watch, with horror, on TV. Everyone was very patient — and still kept providing coffee. As the evening wore on and there was so much still to do, I was whisked away, leaving the production team working into the

early hours. Caroline (Executive Producer) decided I needed to eat and rest, so she took me for a meal, a glass of wine and a pep talk, then sent me to bed. Unfortunately sleep was the last thing I was likely to do. After a phone call home, I spent the next two hours going through scripts and cues, went to bed at midnight, then did the same thing again for another two hours. This had seemed like one of the longest days of my life. I consoled myself with the thought that after tomorrow the first lecture would be “in the bag” and then it would be relatively plain sailing. Eventually I slept, at least for a few hours.

Again I was wrong — it didn’t get any easier. We had spent much of the previous months preparing lecture 1 — later lectures really hadn’t been planned very well. For many, we were still building demonstrations and changing scripts up to a few minutes before recording. Of course we all got more tired, everyone caught a cold, I lost my voice and got thinner by the day. By 17 December when it was over, I was shattered and (after a very lively and late BBC party), returned to the lab and a huge pile of work, press interviews and the daunting prospect of watching the lectures and the story of “The Making of the Christmas Lectures” on TV.

Looking back to December last year, I haven’t changed my view that this was probably the most difficult and stressful time I can remember — even including the last days of revision before exams or the final stages of major grant applications. I feel great sympathy for this year’s Royal Institution Christmas Lecturer, but I am also very envious. Like most challenges in a biologist’s career it was enormously enjoyable, interesting and rewarding — in spite of my complaints ●

After the Christmas Lectures, Nancy returned to her ‘day job’ as MRC Research Professor of Physiology at the University of Manchester. She trained in London (BSc, PhD and DSc in Physiology) and moved to Manchester on a Royal Society Fellowship in 1987. Her research focuses on the role of cytokines in neurodegeneration and neuroimmune interactions — which has rather little to do with the subject of the Royal Institution Christmas lectures.
