

DANA ALLIANCES

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

A look back at three decades of education, influence, and outreach.

Earlier this year, the Dana Foundation closed the chapter on two of its most enduring and well-known investments: The Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives (DABI), and its European counterpart, the European Dana Alliance for the Brain (EDAB). These two advocacy organizations, which included some of the world's most eminent neuroscientists and clinicians on their membership lists, have worked tirelessly to advance public awareness about the progress and promise of brain research. Pierre Magistretti, M.D., Ph.D., professor emeritus at École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) and vice chairman of EDAB, said the two organizations helped usher in a new era of scientific outreach and communications – helping everyday people understand just what brain research could offer them.

“Essentially, these organizations created a new culture in neuroscience – one where it was okay to talk to the public about your work and why it was important,” said Magistretti. “We showed there is value in talking to journalists and to the lay public – and taking the time to increase public understanding of neuroscience. We played an essential role in helping the public understand this research not only has the potential to catch the energy and passion of a scientist, but also the potential to make a real difference in people’s lives.”

An auspicious beginning

In the summer of 1990, former President George H.W. Bush issued a presidential proclamation designating the '90's as the [“Decade of the Brain.”](#) Despite this call for greater investment into neuroscience research to help develop treatments for Alzheimer’s disease, schizophrenia, and stroke, federal and other funding dollars did not follow. In November 1992, Nobel Laureate James Watson, Ph.D., invited 30 leading neuroscientists to Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory (CSHL) to discuss the matter – as well as what the field could do to garner more public and financial support. The guest list included David Mahoney, former marketing executive and then chairman of the Dana Foundation – who spent the first day of the three-day affair listening intently.

“David heard these scientists debating what they could do, and he finally just stood up and told them people aren’t interested in research, per se, or whether your particular organization is getting enough funding. They are interested in results. They are interested in hope,” said Barbara Best, executive director of DABI. “And unless scientists are willing to get out of their comfort zones and start communicating to the public about what they’re doing and how it furthers the progress and promise of brain research, they shouldn’t expect to get any additional funding.”

Mahoney added that, if these scientists, at the top of their fields, were to lead the way and start speaking to the public in language they could understand, the Dana Foundation would be willing to support that effort.

Mahoney’s words changed the tenor of the meeting. The group of vanguard scientists set themselves to the task of determining how they could best translate advances in brain research to a lay audience. And with that, DABI was born. Less than a year later, the Alliance was officially launched in Washington, D.C. Marilyn Albert, Ph.D., professor of neurology at the Johns Hopkins University and an early member of DABI, said, with the Dana Foundation’s help, the members of the Alliance took a new approach to communicating their research to the greater world.

“David was the consummate salesman,” she said. “He believed very strongly that if we didn’t go out and sell what we were doing, and let everyone know why it mattered, people were not going to support it. He said that if we wanted people to tell Congress to increase funding and wanted people to participate in research trials, you couldn’t ask them to go out and read scientific reports. You had to show them why this kind of work was relevant to themselves. He really saw it as a vital part of your obligation as a neuroscientist.”

Even from the beginning, DABI commanded an impressive membership of leading scientists. Steven Hyman, M.D., director of the Stanley Center for Psychiatric Research at the Broad Institute, and current chairman of the Board of Directors at the Dana Foundation, said he wasn’t at the original meeting, but quickly “got swept up in the excitement” of this new endeavor.

“There were so many accomplished and senior people involved with the Alliance – people like Eric Kandel and Joseph Coyle – and they were inspiring,” he said. “At that point, even as the director of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), I was a little more junior in my career than they were, but they, like David Mahoney, understood people had to start making a strong case for their research. They knew, ultimately, what they were working on could make a difference for human health and well-being, if only we told people about it. Together, they got us excited about advocating for the field.”

Expanding outward

The Dana Foundation, however, was not content with having just a U.S.-based advocacy organization. In 1996, Mahoney was introduced to Magistretti, then a professor at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland, by a mutual friend at an Alpine resort.

“We played golf and had dinner – and he told me that the Dana Foundation was in the process of starting an alliance in Europe,” said Magistretti. “I had already been involved in expanding the public understanding of neuroscience in Switzerland. I’ve always thought it was important since what we do costs money, and we need to explain what we do to those that give us that funding.”

Magistretti recalls that Mahoney was very passionate about the project. When the Dana Foundation leader asked him to get involved, Magistretti immediately said yes.

“I remember once David told me, jokingly, that with the brain, you had an incredible product to sell – and we should be out there selling it. Once we started talking about the goals for what would become EDAB, we immediately clicked,” he said. “He asked me and Colin Blakemore to take the lead.”

Blakemore, a well-known British neurobiologist, already had great experience in advocacy and outreach work. He had participated in several television programs for the BBC and was a popular figure across the United Kingdom. The two got to work recruiting scientists to join the Alliance – and finding new and innovative ways to support the general mission but also, as Magistretti put it, “tailor our efforts to European sensibilities.”

“EDAB had some challenges that DABI did not, especially as we got started,” Magistretti said. “In the U.S., fundamentally, you have one language and one culture. In Europe, however, we have many languages and many cultures. We quickly realized we needed to mobilize local scientists in each country if we were going to be successful. Luckily, we had many scientists who were interested in getting involved.”

EDAB was officially launched at the DAVOS World Economic Forum in 1997, opening offices in both London and Switzerland.

Unique offerings and programs

Once established, both DABI and EDAB got to work. The first official DABI event was a public forum with neuroscientist W. Maxwell Cowan and Watson at Southampton College, entitled, “Genes and the Brain.” Best said she was originally concerned that the title might be too vague to attract a large audience. But the event ended up being standing room only.

“There were so many people there. People coming with their teenagers. The author Tom Wolfe in his white suit and hat, was there. And they were all there for this public forum on a very esoteric topic,” she said. “It was a great conversation that was designed for the general public. And at the end, we literally had to cut off Q&A with the audience because it would have kept going for hours if we hadn’t.”

Early on, DABI started meeting with policymakers to acquaint them with the Alliance and its efforts – and continued its public forums. One notable forum was the Successful Aging series, a speaker series that helped to educate the public about healthy aging and the brain. Over the next three decades, the Alliances developed partnerships with other neuroscience-related groups, convened press briefings, and developed newsletters, a website, and educational materials for teachers, students, and the public.

Yet perhaps the most notable DABI offering was, and remains, Brain Awareness Week (BAW) [See *From One Man’s Vision to a Global Campaign: Celebrating 20 Years of Brain Awareness Week* - <https://dana.org/article/from-one-mans-vision-to-a-global-campaign-celebrating-20-years-of-brain-awareness-week/>]. This week-long event, held the third week of March each year since 1996, was a remarkable grassroots effort to help educate the public about the power of neuroscience research. John Byrne, Ph.D., a professor of neurobiology and anatomy at UT Health Houston, said BAW allowed Alliance members, and their institutions, to get creative about sharing the importance of brain research.

“The early Alliance members really showed us what was possible – especially with the public forums,” he said. “But, like many, I got the bug for helping to organize our own BAW events in Houston. Every year, we’d do a public forum. But we also started doing these brain nights for kids and other events that are really fun.”

Byrne credits the Dana Foundation team for supporting DABI and EDAB’s efforts, both for BAW and beyond.

“I think most scientists are somewhat modest and can be a bit timid about talking about their work with the public,” he said. “But from the very beginning, the Dana team, including Barbara Gill and Barbara Best, were right there to guide us. People always talk about David Mahoney’s enthusiasm – and it was great. But we always had these other folks in the background, supporting us, helping us, and making it all work.”

Evolving with the times

When the idea for DABI first germinated at CSHL in 1992, the original 30 Alliance members generated ten specific research goals for the group, as well as the promise to communicate with the public about their progress toward those objectives. As new advances in technologies to support neuroscience research became available, it was clear the Alliance needed to update those goals. In 2000, DABI hosted a follow-up meeting with 33 of its leading members to develop an agenda for the future. They came up with a new list of achievable goals, including combating the devastating impact of Alzheimer’s disease, developing more successful treatments for psychiatric disorders, and creating new approaches to pain management.

Over the years, the organization evolved but continued to stay relevant and communicate the progress and promise of brain research. Caroline Montojo, Ph.D., president, and chief executive officer of the Dana Foundation, said it was their pioneering work that laid the foundation for the non-profit's new direction, with a focus on Neuroscience & Society, announced earlier this year.

“Our new mission is made possible by the accomplishments of DABI and EDAB and their amazing work to raise awareness of brain research,” she said. “In fact, it was the DABI/EDAB membership, especially the executive committees, that pointed out the importance of focusing on the intersection of neuroscience and society. The field has changed a great deal from where it was nearly 30 years ago, when the Alliances first started. With the successes that DABI and EDAB achieved, and the practical foundation they established for communicating with the public, we can confidently move forward with a new focus on neuroscience and neurotechnology advances in the context of societal goals and human values.”

While Hyman said he is sad to see the Alliances end, he said he feels that the organization has accomplished its mission – and has made a real difference for the field of neuroscience as well as society at large.

“Thanks to this incredible global network of scientists who were advocating for the field, it’s now become second nature for neuroscientists to talk about their work and what it offers to both our scientific understanding of the brain and applications for different brain-related diseases,” he said. “Not only did DABI and EDAB give scientists who were involved with the groups a shared mission for advocacy and a great sense of camaraderie, it showed us how valuable it was to form these alliances, with each other and with other stakeholders. Today’s younger scientists are far more comfortable and more equipped to talk about their work. For me, the major accomplishment of DABI and EDAB is the fact that we created this foundation that really changed the way scientists understood their role in both sharing their progress and garnering support for their endeavors. And that will continue on.”

