Podcast Interview: Inder Verma

SR: I’m Sandeep Ravindran and welcome again to Science Sessions. This week I’ll be talking with the new Editor-in-Chief of the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, Inder Verma. A molecular biologist at the Salk Institute of Biological Studies in La Jolla, California, Verma was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1997 and has served on the editorial board of PNAS since 2001. Verma received his Ph.D. in biochemistry from the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel, and performed postdoctoral research at MIT in the laboratory of Nobel laureate David Baltimore. His research at the Salk Institute focuses on cancer genetics, inflammation and gene therapy. I spoke with Verma about his new role at PNAS and his future plans for the journal.

What was your reaction when you heard you had been invited to serve as Editor-in-Chief?

IV: It was exciting, humbling. Part of it was really a bit of vanity that, you know, you are becoming the leader of an extremely highly recognized and respectable journal. I felt quite honored that I was asked to do it.

SR: What do you consider the strengths of PNAS relative to science journals of a similar caliber?

IV: Well the biggest strength of PNAS is that its manuscripts are reviewed and edited by scientists. So that’s a big difference, that this is done by active scientists, compared to many other journals who have scientists who may be running it but they’re not active bench scientists so they’re actually quite remote from that.

SR: How do you plan to make the journal more appealing to younger scientists?

IV: First of all I think the perception still exists that in PNAS to get a paper published you need to know a member of the Academy. I think we have to dispel that notion because that is not the case. 85% of our papers submitted are by scientists who are not members of the National Academy of Sciences. It is a top journal, and we just have to make it even more attractive to our younger scientists as we go along.

SR: What changes do you propose to make PNAS more attractive for general readers?

IV: I would like to see if there’s a way to reduce the size of the journal more to a manageable one, that we can carry in our briefcase at any place. Second I’m also thinking of having more front-end matter which makes the journal interesting, that the front-end matter is not only science that is being published in that issue but also science that is around us. So the front-end is really creating a bit of journalism out of the
journal, and I think journalism is what appeals to people; journal is what appeals to scientists.

SR: How important is it for scientists to engage the public?

IV: I think all scientists have a responsibility to better engage the public, because science is contributing to the well-being and the welfare of the man, and therefore the more you explain to them what science is doing, the more likely they will be to say “Wow, that’s going to benefit me in the long run!” So I think it’s in our self-interest to promote more understanding of science among people.

SR: What are your future plans for the journal?

IV: Remember, the journal is doing extremely well. It’s a very good journal, already on a very good footing, so I have no intention to make any dramatic changes, but as time goes on, my desire is to make it a better journal.

SR: Thank you for listening to PNAS Science Sessions. You can find more Science Sessions podcasts and a QnA with Dr. Verma at PNAS.org.