

Q&A

MY MAIL

STEPHEN SCHERER

The world-renowned geneticist gets inundated with letters — up to 1,000 a day — after his work makes news headlines. He talks with **Megan Ogilvie** about his fan mail

You get a lot of mail from the public who read about your breakthroughs and your research accomplishments in the newspapers.

We're always very excited to hear from the public directly.

I'd say 90 per cent of the feedback is positive in that people are excited to hear that there's been progress.

They're excited, in many cases, that a scientific story is being featured instead of a politician or a sports figure. And that's very, very satisfying.

In 10 per cent of cases we get negative feedback or controversial feedback or just feedback that's, umm, how do I put it... strange?

Does most of your mail come by email rather than by post?

The vast majority is by email. Maybe less than 5 per cent will come through regular post. I've received handwritten letters from some of my well-established older mentors, which is really wonderful and a nice gesture. And I still get a lot of phone calls.

For those people who know me, I hate talking on the phone. So often I'll ask my assistant to ask people to email instead. Sometimes when they get through on the phone it's uncomfortable for me.

So how does this conversation make you feel, then?

Oh, no. This one's fine. It's just when people call and catch you off guard and you want to give them the best answer possible.

Have you ever gotten a package? Or donations for your research efforts?

We always get things like fruit baskets or plants. Sometimes they're sent directly. Sometimes they're dropped off.

Donations? Absolutely. Many small donations will come through the Sick Kids Foundation and in some cases there are some real big fish that come because of the press coverage.

Do you remember the first letter that you got from a stranger about your research?

The very first one?

Or the one that sticks out most in your mind?

We discovered two genes involved in epilepsy in the late '90s and I received a handwritten letter from an old lady from Northern Ontario and there was a \$10 bill in the letter and she said "please contribute this to your research." That was really heart-warming. She probably didn't have a lot of money, but she took the time to write to say, "This is a great story and here is some extra money I had and please contribute this to your research." That (\$10) will be used up in one second in the laboratory because what we do is very expensive. But the fact that she wrote is an amazing thing.

Any letter brought you to tears?

The autism story there were numerous letters that brought me to tears. The families are just so happy that somebody is working towards their cause. They don't expect a cure or a treatment.

They just want to know somebody is working with them. When they express those terms to you, how it gives their children and their families hope, it makes you want to work harder.

I've heard you've been asked for certain donations. Sperm donations.

Yeah. That's happened.

A dozen times?

Er, usually I get to that word, then I delete the email. Probably a half dozen.

Are those the strangest letters you've gotten?

I often get emails or phone calls from someone who knows the answer to a question I've been trying to solve for 10 years or so. So those are always interesting. Someone who knows which gene is causing autism or someone who knows the cure for autism.

Who do you think was the first scientist to get fan mail?

That's a good question. Einstein was an icon. Of course he didn't have email, but he was probably the most public of scientific figures in history. Arguably he was probably one of the most famous human beings of all time. In my era, since I've been active in the field — and I started my lab in the late '90s — probably Craig Venter has been most in the public eye. In the sciences, our group has probably had some of the most press in the last 10 years. It could be worse, right? It could be that nobody cares about what we do.

MOVER AND SHAKER

AGE: 43

BORN: Windsor, Ont.

FAMILY STATUS: Married with two children.

TITLES: Director and senior scientist, The Centre for Applied Genomics at The Hospital for Sick Children; professor of medicine at the University of Toronto.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS: In the last four months, Scherer has

had major press for his research on the human genome map and for identifying the genetic underpinnings of autism. His favourite award — he's been given many — is the 2001 International Year of the Volunteer award for helping children.



TANNIS TOOHEY/TORONTO STAR