

## Monster-like fungi grows on science judges

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By revealing the secrets of athlete's foot, mega mushrooms, glow sticks and the tan colour of tea, two young researchers won the first heat of a hunt for the next generation of science popularisers.

FameLab, science's answer to Pop Idol, aims to find a "Curie meets Davina McCall" figure, or an "Einstein meets Jonathan Ross", who will galvanise the nation's enthusiasm for clones, quarks or genetics.



**The winners of the first heat of this year's FameLab, Steve Robertson and Sarah Curtis**

Over the weekend, the first heat of FameLab was held at the Centre for Life in Newcastle upon Tyne to find new faces to take over from the likes of Robert Winston, David Attenborough and Susan Greenfield.

The winners were Steve Robertson, 27, a Newcastle University student doing a doctorate in fungal degradation, and Sarah Curtis, 21, a master's student from the University of Leeds.

They had three minutes to impress a judging panel which included Harry Witchel, Bristol University physiologist and prize-winning science communicator; Kate Bellingham, engineer and former Tomorrow's World presenter, and Kashaf Chaudhry, the deputy commissioning editor of science and history at Channel 4. "We found two very good people to go to the final," said Dr Witchel.

Mr Robertson gripped the judges with his unlikely description of fungi: "There is something lurking in the woods ... it grows to weigh more than two tons, eats its prey alive and can destroy entire buildings." He moved on to mould, beer and athlete's foot.

Miss Curtis revealed the chemistry of tea. Then, imagining that her mother was in the audience, she explained why clubbers can make their glow sticks last for another rave

by freezing them.

This year's FameLab contestants travelled from as far afield as St Andrews, Manchester and Liverpool, and ranged from lecturers in pharmacy to science teachers, cloners, stem cell scientists, technicians and students. Rachel Lee, a PhD student from Northumbria University, hobbled in on crutches with a plastic bird to deliver an impassioned description of "pigeon fancier's lung".

A Sunderland University lecturer struggled with a deck chair and a metaphor to do with "Mexican waves of tut-tuts in a crowded train" to explain how molecules that respond to sweet tastes work.

The prize for the winner of the final at the Cheltenham Science Festival in June, after a masterclass in communication, is £2,000, the opportunity to work with a television producer and pitch ideas to Channel 4, and a tour of events.

FameLab is being run by the Cheltenham Science Festival, National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (Nesta), Channel 4 and The Daily Telegraph, with the support of Research Councils UK, the British Council and the medicine company Pfizer.

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