

2004 Winter Dinner Meeting Review

By Tom McDonald

The Forge Room at H's Lordships in Berkeley was filled to capacity for the GETA Annual Dinner Meeting, held March 3, 2004. It was a beautiful evening, blue skies yielding to a great sunset and nighttime reflections off the water. The nice evening seemed to translate to a good mood among the meeting participants, as evidenced by the lively conversations that extended from inside the room, out the door and half way around the bar!

The highlight of the evening was our featured speaker, Dr. Dino Di Monte, Director of Basic Research at the Parkinson's Institute in Sunnyvale. Dr. Di Monte was quite an entertaining speaker and delivered an interesting presentation. He summarized research findings, conducted by his Institute and others, that have attempted to unravel the mystery of what causes Parkinson's Disease. At times in the past, researchers have leaned towards a primarily genetic explanation, whereas at other points, have pointed to environmental triggers as the important determinants. Research, spanning several decades, seems to have converged recently. Several genes have been recently identified that are linked to families with a history of early-onset Parkinson's Disease. One such gene codes for a protein called α -synuclein, whose endogenous function is unclear, but tends to aggregate to form fiber-like structures that may be involved in the pathogenesis of the disease. This protein is highly expressed following toxic insult to the region of the brain where neuronal cell damage and loss occurs in Parkinson's Disease. Interestingly, work in Dr. Di Monte's lab and others have shown that exposure to environmental agents, such as the pesticides paraquat and rotenone, induce the expression of α -synuclein. Thus, current research points to the possibility that a gene-environment interaction may be the root cause of the majority of Parkinson's Disease cases. Who knows where the research winds will blow the story next?

Thanks to all who attended and made it an enjoyable evening. A special thank you goes to Marina Chiarappa-Zucca, our new GETA treasurer, Karen Steinmetz, the GETA President, and the other GETA board members for making it a smooth-running and successful event.