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EDUCATION

Canadian Idol is for sissies

Forget pop chart potential. To make it to the International Brain Bee -- taking place in Baltimore next week -- teen contestants need poise under pressure and the perfect recall of details such as dopamine's effect on the body. JULIA McKINNELL reports

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HAMILTON -- 'Cell death in the substantia nigra contributes greatly to what disease?"

For Colin Perkins and five other teenagers, this was the money question on a Tuesday afternoon last month. Part of the Annual McMaster Brain Bee, they were competing for just one slot in an international match of wits coming up in Baltimore. And unless the 16-year-old guessed Parkinson's disease, he would be out -- along with his shot at a $3,000 (U.S.) prize.

But the answer was a cinch for the high-school student. As Colin's mother said teasingly, her son is an "egghead." He is on the Reach for the Top team at Centennial Collegiate Vocational Institute in Guelph, Ont., and is a member of the Latin club. While most of the contestants cram facts from a 65-page primer, he said: "Study for this? Not especially."

Hosted by McMaster University's department of psychology, neuroscience and behaviour in Hamilton, Ont., the "brain bee" operates on the same principle of elimination as a spelling bee -- except that questions are related to the human brain and nervous system. Students memorize details about circadian rhythm, dopamine, reuptake, schizophrenia and the dorsal horn.

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The winner of McMaster's local bee will compete against more than 35 students from India, China and the U.S. at the University of Maryland next Friday.

Champs of the international competition (last year, it was a Canadian) will win cash -- plus a summer internship at a neuroscientist's lab.

"The larger goal is to communicate . . . the importance of neuroscience research," says Professor Judith Shedden, who started the McMaster bee four years ago. She also wants to promote the "excitement" of neuroscience to prospective university students.

Meanwhile, the students competing at McMaster -- about 22 faced off in a written round and six made it to an oral speed round -- were concentrating on getting their facts straight. After all, substantia nigra was a piece of cake compared with some of the other questions. For example: Nogo-A is a protein that inhibits what? Answer: nerve regeneration.

Sixteen-year-old Isdin Oke twice answered correctly before stumbling on the question of what THC stands for. "I read it in the book, but I couldn't remember it," he said later.

And tension followed when Mays Ali, a 17-year-old from the same school as Colin, was asked: "What do you call the adaptive physical state that results in withdrawal symptoms when drug use stops?"

"Tolerance," she promptly answered -- not what the judges were expecting, though they decided in her favour and named her the winner of the semi-finals.

Born in Iraq, Mays has been living with her 25-year-old sister while her parents work in North Carolina. Her dream is to become a neurosurgeon.

Mind you, she loves reading as much as science. Of Jane Austen she says, "She writes incredibly complex and intriguing characters that are so engaging and lifelike."

Colin is also into several books at the moment, including Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel* -- though he admits he "skipped" a few pages on grain distribution.

As for his less-than-victorious performance at this year's Brain Bee? "Next year is when I'm going to hit the books and really go for it," he says. "Mays is the real egghead around here. And that's not meant as an insult. That's meant as a compliment."

Julia McKinnell is a freelance writer based in Toronto.