Around Europe

Speaking of Laureates

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*Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.*

Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," xiv

Recently 18 junior fellows and research students of the Medical Research Council of Great Britain were privileged to attend a series of lectures given by Nobel Prize winners. These meetings have been held annually for the past 25 years; every third year either medicine (including physiology), chemistry, or physics is discussed informally by some of medical science's most prestigious protagonists. In June 1975 the stage for the dramatic presentations, science's Royal Command Performance, was a congenial setting by the picturesque shores of the Bodensee, West Germany.

This brief note is a personal view of the lectures delivered at Lindau, particularly those that dealt with some of the more thorny philosophical questions of contemporary medicine. Each Laureate could devote 45 minutes to whatever topic he thought of most interest to the heterogeneous audience that filled the Stadttheater.

Natural philosophy?

The early scientists were known as natural philosophers. It might be supposed that Nobel Laureates would welcome an opportunity to maintain this tradition. Not so, though Severo Ochoa certainly chose a topic, "gene technology," that lends itself to wide philosophical discussion. He delved into technical advances that have allowed scientists to manipulate genetic material in living cells *in vitro*, but disappointment was expressed after his lecture that he was not prepared to commit himself on the ethical problems inherent in his experiments. It would have been particularly interesting to know his personal views on the ethics of genetic engineering.

Nevertheless, two Laureates did not hesitate to deal with pressing contemporary issues.

Euthanasia

Werner Forssman spoke on "euthanasia." My instinctive response was one of admiration, and not simply because Forssman was almost invariably seen in relaxed mood with huge

cigar in hand. His views were courageous and uninhibited. Forssman described how modern science takes seriously only what can be defined in mathematical terms and leaves aside philosophical concepts. He attacked a group of renowned scientists, including Nobel Laureates (not present), who were agitating for euthanasia, astutely pointing out, without arrogance, that no physicians were among the forty who supported this proposal. Forssman insisted that euthanasia must be kept totally apart from politics and emphasised the problem of leaving the decision to terminate life to the individual patient. The patient, he underlined, could undergo very rapid changes of thought and will. There were grave dangers in making exceptions for individuals that he interpreted as "opening up the ethical practice of medicine to abuse."

The end of this formidable lecture was dramatic. Forssman related a dream in which he had undergone a routine medical check. When the examination was complete his doctor handed him a bouquet of flowers, congratulated him on reaching his 70th birthday in perfect health, but said that he was sorry that this age, considered "unproductive" so far as society was concerned, made the termination of his life obligatory. Forssman walked to his seat amid the applause that reflected the admiration that he had won for this forthright statement of his beliefs on the practice of medicine.

This lecture exactly represented the needs of medical science at conferences such as that at Lindau. Channels of communication have been established, and the latest advances can be read in learned journals or heard at symposia. But what platform could be more suitable for the presentation and discussion of issues that medicine faces but cannot accept?

Research priorities

And so to the high point of the Lindau meeting. Thomas Weller received the Nobel Prize with John F Enders and Frederick C Robbins in 1954 "for their discovery of the ability of poliomyelitis viruses to grow in cultures of various types of tissue." From the Lindau platform Weller deliberated on "biochemical science and the Third World." He sounded a rarely heard message in the ears of the scientific world. He spoke of the absolute necessity for scientists to consider the question of priority in research. Although scientific discoveries are frequently abused, all new scientific knowledge can be said to be good. But scientists, and all others, must distinguish between what is good and what is better and between what is better and what is best.

DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Weller began by stating a truism: that some of the problems of the scientific community seem small compared with the opportunities for meeting human need in developing countries. And so he described us as a "favoured few" who need to be humble as we consider our special role. As he looked at the

problems of the developing world, with the world population doubling every 35 years, he saw the synergistic effects of infectious disease and malnutrition and the demand for economic and social progress. There are, he said, 17 countries in which less than 1 US dollar is spent *per capita per year* on health. Less than half of the world's population has access to adequate drinking water. Physicians tend to "congregate" in urban areas: in urban Kenya there is one doctor for every 800 people; in rural Kenya 50 000 people are served by each doctor. Weller then showed that biomedical knowledge has an "inadequate status." He cited the parasitic diseases. To change this field was the responsibility of biomedical science. He went further and said that it was also "the social responsibility of academic institutions in *developed* nations." The health care programmes adopted in certain countries were irrelevant to the needs, highlighted by the lack of medical auxiliaries. Weller described how in Nigeria the financial stimulus of the discovery of oil had led to plans to quadruple the intake of medical students to the country's universities but without any proposal to increase the numbers of medical auxiliaries.

MOTIVES AND OBLIGATIONS

Weller is no armchair critic: he has actively attacked the lack of research into some of the greatest health hazards and has attempted to culture the schistosome parasite himself. He has influenced students to go to Central and South America to augment the struggle against the tropical diseases. One extension of Weller's thesis is that every scientist should consider his

motives in research. I do not want to appear to be placing a value judgment on particular work or the motives underlying it; I do want to share words which I am glad were spoken in my hearing, particularly since I am embarking on a career in medical scientific research.

It may be best to conclude this detailed account of Thomas Weller's absorbing lecture with his own penetrating words spoken in Lindau, "The success or failure of our researches only rarely affects the needs of man." What an indictment. Perhaps the financial stringencies, part of our contemporary scene, will force us to reappraise our priorities in medical research and our obligations to our fellow men, particularly those who happen to have been born in the two-thirds of the world where survival, and not personal gain, is the prime instinct.

Goals

To be awarded the Nobel Prize is the zenith of the world's recognition of a scientist's work. The prizes remain for the chosen few. Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," however, eloquently reminds us that there are many great contributions to humanity by scientists not sustained by public acclamation. For these investigators, the goal is not the acquisition of worldly laurels, but the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, which one hopes are for the betterment of mankind.

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Letter from . . . South Australia

Health care under the Fraser Government

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The upheavals of the Australian election have been covered by the British press. Everyone should now know that Mr Whitlam's Labour Government suffered a technical knock-out because the Upper House was able to starve it of funds. Mr Malcolm Fraser's Liberal Party refused to back down, for in denying supply by their control of the Senate voting they saw the possibility of forcing an election. The opinion polls had shown that the Liberal Party had a very good chance of being returned. In holding firm Mr Fraser implicated the Governor-General, who had to adjudicate in a constitutional crisis. It is now a matter of history that the Governor-General dismissed Mr Whitlam from office since he was unable to govern without funds being voted to him. Mr Fraser thereupon was made caretaker Prime Minister until the general election was called on 13 December.

It was something of a surprise to most political observers, and even to Mr Fraser, that the Liberal Country Party was

returned with such a massive majority. Mr Whitlam had been accused of mismanaging the economy and of presidential style government. Certainly it seems that his social policies were very expensive and were running the country deeper and deeper into debt and inflation, together with increasing unemployment. It seems to be a very familiar picture. Mr Fraser campaigned hard on his ability to manage the economy more efficiently and made light of any constitutional crisis there might have been. In this it appears that Mr Whitlam was out-manoeuvred, for the people have shown overwhelmingly that they care more about money than they do about the constitution. In this they are probably right, for, despite the vehemence with which the Labour Party fumed about the constitution being violated, to a simpleton in constitutional niceties propriety was exercised and the right thing was done according to a British-type system. At least the electorate obviously thought so, and little is now heard, so short a time after the event, about any crisis—though one is developing in the Labour Party about its future leadership.

The health services seem never to be of prime electoral importance, and in the recent Australian election little about them was published in the general press. It will be realised that few policies about anything were fully discussed or presented. Like many other elections it was fought on the basis that "anything you can do I can do better," though the reasons for this