



## Private prescription:

A thought-provoking tonic on the lighter side

Column by Raymond C. Rowe, AstraZeneca, UK

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- photographers in the auditorium, which invoked a reaction of wariness;
- messages on the television monitors regarding illegally parked cars, which invoked a reaction of nervousness; and
- the inclusion of certain words such as 'in conclusion' or 'finally', which invoked an arousal response.

The authors then went on to investigate the effect of introducing extraneous matter into the lectures in the form of slides graded as either very boring (detailed tables of data), neutral (simple graphics), interesting (photographs of faces or tattooed bodies) or very interesting (photographs of ET or comic figures). Despite the fact that the overall enjoyment of the presentations increased when slides graded as interesting or very interesting were introduced, recall of the actual content of the lecture was surprisingly constant. The incidence of sleep increased on the introduction of the very boring slides and decreased on the introduction of the very interesting slides.

# Lessons for lecturers – ptosis and singultus

One of the most famous and, in his time, brilliant lecturers was (we are told) Michael Faraday. Endowed with a compulsive urge to write and a memorable way of communicating his thoughts, Faraday produced a huge stack of written contributions, among them detailed comments on the lecturer's art. On his strategy for holding the interest of an audience, he wrote<sup>1</sup>:

A lecturer should exert his utmost effort to gain completely the mind and attention of the audience, and irresistibly make them join in his ideas to the end of the subject. He should endeavour to raise their interest at the commencement of the lecture and by a series of imperceptible gradations, unnoticed by the company, keep it alive as long as the subject demands it... No opportunity should be allowed to the audience in which their minds could wander from the subject.

### In practice

So much for the theory, what about the practice? Every lecturer knows the scene: the first presentation after a heavy lunch or dinner or the last presentation at the

end of a long day. The audience is generally glassy-eyed; some show signs of interest, some yawn and shuffle their feet, others become semi-comatosed and even fall asleep.



It is interesting to note that the prevalence of the last group in scientific meetings has been actively studied<sup>2</sup>. Using infrared viewers to scan eye movements, especially ptosis (drooping of the eyelids), the authors were able to design a stupor index and relate it to the attentiveness of audiences at specific scientific meetings held at seven popular conference centres throughout the world. They found that, on average, the prevalence of sleep was of the order of 40%. Factors found to have a specific effect on the stupor index were:

### Helpful advice

How does this help the lecturer? Obviously there is little that can be done about increasing the audience's recall of the content of the lecture. However, as already shown, it is possible to influence the overall level of enjoyment of the presentation. To this end, it is worth invoking the mnemonic HICCUP advocated by Sir Arnold Wolfendale, the eminent astrophysicist and past Astronomer Royal<sup>3</sup>:

- H** is for humour (if carefully handled)
- I** is for incompleteness (admit we do not know everything)
- C** is for controversy (everyone loves it)
- C** is for culture (links to cultural pursuits are good)
- U** is for understanding (that is what it is all about)
- P** is for physics (the most important branch of human enquiry there is!)

With the exception of the last statement where 'pharmacy' could be arguably substituted for 'physics', this is

very good advice for all readers of *Drug Discovery Today* who are required to give public lectures.

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*Careful observation of the degree of ptosis in the audience and the judicious inclusion of singultus should ensure a successful lecture.*

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A handful of jokes is a necessity when the projector fails or, as is more common nowadays, the projector and computer are incompatible. Humour can also be introduced into the lecture through the

judicious use of cartoons, especially those with a scientific bias. Incompleteness and controversy are assured in the area of drug discovery and development. Culture is a difficult one although the inclusion of classical music is relatively easy with the use of video projection. Understanding of the subject matter is essential.

In essence, a lecture should be entertaining and the lecturer should strive to achieve this end no matter the audience or venue. Of course there is no substitute for thorough preparation, professional delivery and good visual aids, but a careful observation of the degree of ptosis in the audience and the judicious inclusion

of singultus (hiccup) should ensure a successful lecture!!!

## References

- 1 Thomas, J.M. (1991) *Michael Faraday and the Royal Institution*, p. 99, Adam Hilger
- 2 Harvey, R.F. *et al.* (1983) Dreaming during scientific papers: the effect of added extrinsic material. *Br. Med. J.* 287, 1916–1918
- 3 Wolfendale, A. (2000) Mnemonic device. *Europhysics News* 31, 3

**Raymond C. Rowe**  
 Pharmaceutical and Analytical R&D  
 AstraZeneca, Alderley Park, Macclesfield,  
 Cheshire, UK SK10 2NA  
 tel: +44 1625 513112  
 fax: +44 1625 512381  
 e-mail: Ray.Rowe@astrazeneca.com

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