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## Public Responsibility and the Professions

THE SYMPOSIUM ON WHAT TO DO ABOUT FOOD FADDISM, presented recently before the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology, brought forth some convincing arguments for an increased sense of public responsibility on the part of scientists. The general conclusions as to what could be done to improve protection of the public against pseudoscientific jackals emphasized strongly the need for better education of the public.

The good professional scientist is, of course, objective. From an objective point of view he surely believes that the goal of his work is to contribute to society, not only to increase his professional prestige among his scientific colleagues. If research work is to contribute to the welfare of society, it must go beyond the pages of the scientific journals. If it is significant, it will be carried into practice by the applied scientists and others. But, there are some areas where public education as to the background of the practical developments is greatly needed. Those areas which visibly affect the well-being of every individual every day are important ones for sound public education—nutrition is one example. If the scientists with sound, authoritative knowledge do not make an effort to carry information to the public, the hacks, quacks, pitch men, and shoddy politicians will, for their own profit and the public's loss. But also the scientific professions will suffer a loss.

It is not only the faddist or the quack who will step into the vacuum. Recently we encountered an example of a well-known writer in the act. Pointing out that he had scientific education, he proceeded to put together a collection of complaints older than the science he attacked, gripes occasionally tossed off by almost any individual under conditions of dissatisfaction with a product he has bought, some half-truths, some truths, some double-talk, and an impressive command of vocabulary. The result was an article which damned science for what it is doing to his personal life, published in a prominent magazine read by well-educated people. It was written well enough that many readers are likely to recall some of their occasionally annoying experiences and feel that the writer has put into words just what they would have liked to say. Favorable and beneficial accomplishments of science in that area will be forgotten, but some specific cases of dissatisfaction will come to mind and the scientist will get a black mark in the book of the reader.

We do not recall having seen an article in that same magazine or one similar, written by a capable scientist and dealing with the same subject—which could be made extremely interesting in a positive light.

This does not mean that scientists should turn their efforts to becoming pulp hacks or publicity hounds. But it does mean that they should realize that there is nothing unsavory, unprofessional, or degrading about cooperation with the lay press. For those who do not care for writing there is now an encouraging number of capable, responsible science writers who are glad to cooperate in carrying to the public accurate information on scientific developments. Writing in the public press is not the only means of communication. There are speaking opportunities. Local ACS sections have radio and television programs. Simple personal communication and a variety of special approaches are possible.

Adelia Beeuwkes in speaking before the Federation brought forth a number of cogent points: "Application of scientific research does not necessarily require a full understanding of the research itself." "We can meet ignorance with knowledge and superstition with fact only when we have sufficient knowledge." "As long as the publication of nutrition information remains only within the covers of professional magazines, we are simply 'converting the converted.' "

Certainly it can do the scientific profession no good and it will frustrate some of the important aims of scientific research to allow speakers on radio or television, or writers in the public press who claim without substantiation to be "leading authorities" in a scientific field to preach sensational ideas or criticisms which may be attractive or exciting but are fallacious.

The research scientist may contend, and justifiably, that his duty is the development of new knowledge, but the position or atmosphere that he creates through the development of new knowledge will be used by others and sometimes it may be used against him. It is not unusual today to find in the public press damnations of the meddling of scientists with nature, usually based on misinformation either intentional or unintentional. It is well to remember that the public is inclined to suspect something it feels is kept from it and about which it feels it has no understanding for themselves. The "medicine man" who sells phony "health foods" or "patent medicines," or promotes specious weight reducing methods; the "adviser" who counsels for a fee on problems which can be cured by the "application of science"; or the cynical politician interested in his own rise at the cost of the public welfare. There is another group which means very well but is misinformed. With the best of intentions and great energy they crusade for what they believe is good—but the information on which they stand is unsound and the result is harmful. Their plight could be remedied with sound information.

Science has been called a sacred cow. We do not agree, but if it can be held up to the public as a sacred cow it can be exposed to abuse and criticism. It is the scientists themselves who are in the best position to originate action against this. A great many misdeeds are committed in the darkness—ignorance is one of the most fertile forms of darkness.