COMMENTARY

Who Speaks for the Future?

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In attempting to explain how equally moral and intelligent individuals can differ so bitterly in their approach to the licensing of new drugs, Daniel Koshland once observed (1):

"To the scientist, the number of individuals who might benefit in future generations is so much greater than the number who suffer risk in any chemical drug trial that he can easily bow to the tyranny of numbers and react impatiently to conservative controls. To the consumer advocate, the tears of one individual or the tragedy of a single crippled body are so much more compelling than statistics that he can easily forget the perils of delaying a drug."

Koshland's synopsis of these attitudes would not likely enamor either party. Scientists, for example, would be quick to argue that they, too, care about individuals being harmed by drugs, and consumer advocates would point out that the adverse effects of a drug released today are destined to inflict damage upon every generation that follows, and the numbers of those harmed is potentially great. So in a very real sense, both speak of numbers, of harm, and of the future. Bot does either really speak *for* it in the sense of assuring that the quality of health in the future is not compromised by the needs of the present?

The distinction is one that all scientists would do well to ponder.

Speaking for the future requires a dialog between scientists and the public based upon mutual trust and respect. Unfortunately, this is becoming increasingly difficult due to growing consumer discontent with the drug research and manufacturing community. Consumers may already have reached the conclusion that they cannot trust drug companies, using as evidence such examples as the recent problem with butoxyprofen, and sadly, the circle of distrust is widening to include the entire scientific community as well. The many reports of forged or otherwise shoddy research – some of which has been used to support drug licensing applications to the United States Food and Drug Administration (2) – have corroded a once almost untarnished image.

Scientists everywhere have been shocked by these incidents because they are the antithesis of the historic principle that a colleague's research will always reflect the truth as he or she knows it. Shock, however, is not enough; outrage is demanded. It therefore seems appropriate at the parturition of a new journal to ask that we rededicate ourselves to the ideals of science and pledge ourselves to unearthing and casting out of our midst those who would rob us of our scientific birthright. If we do not, we will most certainly and deservedly relinquish our one of the voices *for* the future.

And who then, we might ask, would speak for it?

References

(1) Koschland, D. E. jr. (1974) in "How Safe is Safe? The Design of Policy on Drugs and Food Additives." National Academy of Sciences, Washington D.C., p. 178.
(2) Feldmann, E. G. (1983) J. Pharm. Sci. 72, 463.

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