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The New Zealand Society of Animal Production - After the Jubilee

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I believe that our Society is at a rather critical stage in its history for a number of reasons which I wish to outline in this address. Two years ago the Society celebrated a very successful Jubilee during which there was, a not undeserved amount of praise of the role and activities of the Society over its first 50 years. We seem to be basking a little in the rosy glow of the self aggrandisement and neglecting the call by many members and previous Presidential addresses by not considering seriously the current and future role of our Society in animal production. We are concentrating on what we do best and easiest; the organisation of an annual conference, publication of the Proceedings and from time to time the production of an Occasional Publication. A reasonable set of objectives on the surface for a Society such as ours.

A more critical analysis I think reveals that all in the garden is not quite so rosy. Take for example, Conference papers. In the majority of them, members present the introduction, material and methods, results and scientific discussion of a piece of recent research. Even this model is not without some insidious changes over the years. The number of papers published per proceedings is increasing from an average of 50 in the early 80s to 80 in the early 90s. This is an excellent trend if it reflects a marked increase in the amount of appropriate research being undertaken, more papers interpreting the impact of the research to livestock systems and quantitative information on the uptake of the research by industry. Even a cursory glance at our recent Proceedings shows them to be almost entirely research reports and what reviews that exist are mainly of scientific areas. This trend is only partly the responsibility of the Society.

There is, now-a-days, a greater expectation and indeed requirement by many science managers for scientific publications as a primary output of research and attendance at a conference is often conditional on presenting a paper. This puts pressure on members to publish as much and often as they can and for the Society to accept as many papers as feasible so as not to exclude members who wish to attend the Conference. This is not an ideal environment for quality control or promotion of minority research interests. Another impact of the 'publish or perish' philosophy may be the trend to an increase in authors per paper. In the early 80s only 16% of papers published in the Proceedings had more than 4 authors. In the last 3 years this figure is 33%. It may be cynical to suggest that it is a case of 'I'll put your name on my paper if you put mine on yours' but I fail to believe that 6 or 9 authors can all have a major input to a paper.

It would take a detailed study of the contents of the Proceedings to justify the feeling expressed by some members recently that our Society is more one of animal science than of animal production, but it may well be true. For example, papers in a relatively applied field such as nutritive value, have been distributed fairly evenly over the 5 decades of the Proceedings, whereas papers on the physiology of ovulation, perhaps a more 'scientific'

area, have shown a remarkable fecundity, 75% of all citations to this topic in the Proceedings being in the last decade.

The trend to a greater proportion of basic research in members portfolios is likely to continue, but the number of groups active in any one research area is likely to decline. It is therefore most important that the Society develop as a strong forum for the justification, peer review and stimulating discussion of research areas. We do not use our formal meetings well for organised, critical discussion of an area, from the on-farm limitations to the research approach, from the research results to the application back at the farm. At the most we get a few awkward questions about the interpretation of our research results. It is difficult for many to have a good 'no holds barred' discussion of wider issues in a large public group. To do this we need to have more small group discussion time, but how do we fit this in with an increasing demand for members to present another 'i-dotting or t-crossing' experiment. There are many other avenues for publication, but few where so many animal scientists can gather for organised discussion. Attendance and participation in a worthwhile discussion can be just as valuable as presenting yet another paper.

The Society has been well served in the past by the voluntary efforts of members and by the understanding of employers of the value of these contributions to career development and the wider good of animal science. With the upcoming re-organisation of research there is a grave risk that unless the Society stresses to CRI Boards and CEOs of the importance of maintaining a Society which provides good peer review, is the sounding board for ideas and stimulation from a wider basis than is possible within any one research organisation, that we will have a much less benevolent environment in which to pursue the Society's aims. Unless managers are convinced of, and supportive, both in principle and in kind, of an involvement in the Society administration, our Society will find it impossible to manage its affairs voluntarily from within its own membership.

I referred earlier to the need for papers which illustrate and document the application of research in practice. Research applications are full of cost benefit statements about the likely impact of particular work but we seldom hear about the proof of the pudding. For example, in beef production, the field with which I am most familiar, there are close to 15 references in the Consolidated Index to factors affecting calving and weaning percentage of the beef cow herd, but there has been no improvement in the marking percentage in the beef cow herd over the last 20 years. On the other hand, the average carcass weight of steers and heifers slaughtered for export has increased substantially from 230 kg in 1970 to 280 kg in 1990 and this might suggest a considerable degree of farmer uptake of research work on pasture feeding to achieve increased growth rate and/or incorporation of the higher liveweight gain genotypes into the beef cattle population. However a more detailed analysis suggests this is mainly a result of an increase in the age at slaughter which has been the response of

farmers to a schedule which has increasingly rewarded the heavier carcass. We need to know more about farmers attitudes. Have we been asking the right questions?. Have we been asking questions at all? Attitude surveys certainly do not feature strongly in our proceedings.

It is debatable then whether our Conference is serving the Society's scientific community as well as it could. Moreover, we have, in my view, a very much unfulfilled obligation to our other members in the livestock industry. Our Occasional Publications are generally the result of an enthusiastic group of members identifying an area where they perceive the need for a summary of a particular field in a 'middle of the road' level publication. There is no doubt that most of these have been quite successful as educational aids and in keeping down the Society membership fee, but they by and large, have not directly reached the rank and file in animal production. The Society does not have a high profile with farmers. It has done little to encourage farmer members in providing 'popular' material about animal production. We have always left this to someone else, often on the excuse that we do not have the skills at this level.

It is probably even more important that the Society accepts a responsibility at this level of communication. Most bids for research funds these days include a component for 'technology transfer' which is laudable but there will be a tendency, although subconscious, for individuals and organisations to 'promote' the

application of their research. For example, there has been a lot of promotion of the novel pasture cultivars and species but not a lot of hard data demonstrating more productive animal production systems utilising these new plants. We must preserve and make better use of the ability of the Society to prepare and present material which is, and is seen to be, the considered opinion of a group which has no vested interest. This an important role for the Society which we have not fully exploited.

What then should we be working towards? A biennial scientific Conference where less time is spent on the presentation of scientific data and more time on the discussion of issues, approaches to problems and the state of the art. A biennial (in alternate years) workshop, perhaps offered in three different regions, which will involve members in local areas running workshops for those practising animal production. These workshops will force the Society to put its science into practice. Groups of Society members with a professional journalist should be under contract, possibly with outside funding to produce 'popular' factsheets on selected topics to be widely distributed among livestock farmers.

Some initiatives have already been made to present the Society in a wider role but we must maintain the impetus if the Society is to both retain its scientific standing and improve its profile at the grass-roots of animal production where it currently has relatively little impact.