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## PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

### Recent progress and future prospects of the New Zealand Society of Animal Production

J. F. SMITH

Periodically the President of the Society devotes the presidential address not to matters of animal production as such but to the Society itself. In fact this will be only the third occasion this has been done since the Society began some 44 years ago. I consider that it is particularly appropriate that the progress and prospects of the Society should be re-examined this year.

It is 21 years since this was first done (Andrews, 1963). The venue on that occasion was also Lincoln College. It was in fact the second conference of the Society to be held at Lincoln but the first of those on a regular rotation. Coincidentally the symposium theme for the present conference "Mineral Requirements of Grazing Ruminants" was the field of endeavour of the late Dr E. D. Andrews who presented that initial assessment of the Society in 1963. A decade later in 1973 Dr G. C. Everitt devoted part of his address to the activities of the Society (Everitt, 1973). Considerable changes have occurred in the Society in the decade since then.

#### Membership

While relatively stagnant from 1963 to 1973 membership of the Society has doubled since then and now stands at 753. The major increase has been in the number of farmers that have joined and these now represent 23.1% of the membership (Table 1). Note this may be an underestimate as a high proportion of the "other" group are unidentified as to occupation and I suspect many are in fact farmers.

However the representation of the various occupations on the management committee and in the attendance at conference would indicate that the scientific segment still dominates the activities in the Society. While comparisons over time should be made with caution because of possible differences in the criteria used for classification, it is of interest to note that the proportion of members in the veterinary category has increased and in fact represents about 14% of the nation's veterinarians. These figures represent a reversal of the demographic trends in membership observed during the sixties.

#### Conference

In line with the increase in membership there has been

a quadrupling of the number of papers presented at the conference from 15 in 1963 to 28 in 1973 and 59 in 1983. The duration of the conference has however remained the same, although Dunedin has been added to the list of regular venues.

The analysis of papers by predominant discipline shown in Table 2 underlines the flexibility of the Society and shows a decreased emphasis on nutrition. This has shown a drop of 14% and has been associated with small increases in most other disciplines with the exceptions of breeding, disease and the general category, which have remained static. The analysis of papers by species is shown in Table 3 and highlights the responsiveness to the Society to industry trends. There has been a resurgence of interest in dairy cattle and a continued increase in papers on beef cattle. The proportion devoted to sheep has remained static while interest in pigs and poultry has declined. Four new species (at least new to the Society's conference) have been reported on in the last decade.

The continued decline in the general category of both analyses suggest an increasing tendency for specialisation. This is a reflection of the developments within research where we now have specialisation among the specialists. The recent increase in farmer presentation and attendance at conference however must to some extent allay the fear of progressive

TABLE 1 Membership occupation category.

	1963 <sup>1</sup>		1973 <sup>2</sup>		1983 <sup>3</sup>	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Scientific <sup>4</sup>	70	30	142	39.9	195	24.6
Advisory	58	25	59	16.5	83	11.0
Farming	63	27	42	11.9	174	23.1
Veterinary	33	14	19	5.4	69	9.2
Overseas	-	-	27	7.6	66	8.8
Student	-	-	-	-	29	3.9
Retired	-	-	-	-	29	3.9
Honorary Life	-	-	10	2.8	15	2.0
Other	9	4	30	8.5	93	12.4
Total	233	100	355	100	753	100

<sup>1</sup> Andrews (1963), based on financial members.

<sup>2</sup> Everitt (1973), based on financial members.

<sup>3</sup> Based on full membership list as at 31/12/83.

<sup>4</sup> Includes university personnel and technicians.

of papers presented and attendance indicate that the second objective continues to be achieved. But again, what of the future? How can the increasing demand for the presentation of information by the enlarged membership be accommodated?

The response to a recent (1980-81) questionnaire on the structure of the conference was disappointing, both in the low proportion of members responding and from the requests received. In general the replies requested longer papers, more discussion time but no increase in conference length. How, one might ask, can these requests be accommodated, when at the same time the increasing membership is encouraged to participate and their interest in presentation is catered for?

I can see few acceptable alternatives to a longer conference. These could be (a) more concurrent sessions, which have already drawn a number of negative responses; (b) poster sessions, which I personally have found unrewarding at other conferences. I believe that poster sessions actually reduce the value of discussion unless special poster discussion sessions are held; (c) the use of a contract system, for presentation of information on a particular topic, as employed in the Australian Society of Animal Production to provide a combined review and current up-dating would seem a definite possibility. It has already proved successful on a limited scale and in a more diffuse format in last year's conference with a livestock symposium and a session on facial eczema and again this year with a mineral symposium. However other attempts to form more formal contracts have aborted through the lack of cooperation of workers in the same field of interest.

The cost of conducting more than one large meeting a year prohibits any thoughts of that alternative, although smaller regional meetings with topics of local and current interest could be conducted under the auspices of the Society.

There could be a restriction imposed on the number of papers a member can present at a meeting. This introduction of a "gag" would in some instances be warmly welcomed but has the potential to stifle and delay the transmission of important and interesting information.

Thus it appears inevitable that if most wishes of the members are to be met then we must have a longer conference. The 'thin edge of the wedge' has already arrived with the relocation of the presentation session to an evening time slot and the addition of a third session on the final day. While the conference continues to be the major annual activity of the Society and despite its effectiveness we must consider that less than 25% of the Society's membership attends.

Thus changes are needed to increase attendance or additional avenues for the participation of members need to be made. Or will we remain, as we have for many years, satisfied that the participation of the majority of members in the activities of the Society ends with the payment of their annual subscription?

## Other Activities and the Society's Profile in the Industry

Andrews stated in 1963 that unlike other professional societies "we neither shape public opinion nor influence policy. Cabinet ministers remain unaware of our existence". I very much doubt that this has changed greatly in the 21 years since then. Although recent requests for the Society to make submissions on various topics such as the Animal Protection Amendment Bill indicate that there is not complete ignorance of our existence. The recent failure of the National Research Advisory Council to consult the Society in the preparation of the animal production sector of their review of science and technology would however only seem to highlight that position.

Questions that must be asked are:

Should the Society become more active in the political area? And how is this to be done? I believe that to fulfill the third objective of the Society we cannot avoid becoming more involved and the recent Society participation in "Flock of the Future" and the Agpol Convention were undertaken with this in mind.

While the general business of the Society is adequately conducted by the management committee there is the need for any submission on behalf of the Society to reflect the views of the majority of members. Some attempt is made at present to ensure a geographical spread among the nominations for the management committee. However there is a need for a more comprehensive and rapid system of feed-back to the committee and the possibility of obtaining this through a regional branch structure should be considered.

Andrews outlined emerging problems that he believed faced New Zealand's animal production industries and therefore the Society. These were a nuclear holocaust and the entry of Britain into the European Economic Community. He believed that the Society should actively be involved in the planning for both eventualities. Fortunately the first problem has not arisen. The second has occurred and because of our lack of action the Society must share some of the blame for the repercussions still being experienced by our animal production industries. The Society needs to become better known and recognised as a major source of expertise in animal production among the various decision-making bodies in Wellington. The many excellent recommendations for policy changes in the organisation of research, education, and industrial structure propounded by past presidents in their addresses to the Society have had little impact unless the author was in a position that enabled him to personally implement the changes.

Until the Society becomes more widely appreciated then these recorded opinions will continue to remain on the bookshelves collecting dust and the wisdom they contain wasted.

I perceive an analogy in the Society's development with that of the reproductive process. The initial act of conception in 1941 was followed by a period of struggle to survive, to achieve implantation and avoid early embryonic death. The next period represented a mid pregnancy period with slow growth and consolidation, although some believed with a considerable risk of mummification. The last decade reflects the late pregnancy period with rapid growth and increasing activity resulting in the birth of an active and functional body currently faced with the dangers of the post-partum period.

Maybe life does begin at 40 and the Society has survived its prolonged and difficult gestation. The expanded interchange with other societies, together with the recent change in the format of the proceedings, the resumption in our own right of publishing and marketing activities, the excursion into the TV arena and the enhanced political profile of recent times, all indicate that a vibrant future exists for the

Society. However, there is no room for complacency in any form and there is an urgent need to review the organisation of the Society and the format of its activities so that it is best suited to meet the economic, technical and political problems of the future. Members must ensure that the Society's vitality and success become fact and that its recent achievements are not merely a bright façade for a corpse.

I would like to conclude by paraphrasing a quotation of John F. Kennedy

*"Members should not ask what the Society does for them but rather what they can do for the Society".*

## REFERENCES

- Andrews E. D. 1963. The New Zealand Society of Animal Production—Its past, present and future. *Proceedings of the New Zealand Society of Animal Production* **23**: 5-12.
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