Fate of conference abstracts

SIR — Given the number of scientific conferences held worldwide, and the amount of time physicians and scientists spend attending them, we decided to investigate the fate of abstracts presented at these meetings. We wanted to know how many ultimately became papers published in peer-reviewed journals, and, if published, how closely they resembled the original abstract.

We randomly selected 100 abstracts presented at the 1992 annual scientific meetings of each of four associations: the American Heart Association, the Feder-

percentage, if not a majority, of abstracts presented at scientific conferences do not evolve into papers. However, abstracts in general present data in significant advance of any subsequent publication in peer-reviewed journals.

Lynda Liu

Robert S. Danziger*

PH1151,

College of Physicians and Surgeons,

Columbia University,

630 West 168th Street,

New York, New York 10032, USA

*To whom correspondence should be addressed.

this so-called radium was really barium — the crucial result that represented the discovery of fission. Thus, “good solid chemistry got things on the right track”², but Strassmann, who designed the work and carried it out, remained “in the shadow of the sensation” as his biography is entitled³.

Günter Herrmann

Institut für Kernchemie,

Johannes Gutenberg-Universität,

D-55099 Mainz,

Germany

Gerhart Friedlander

5 Lorraine Court,

Smithtown,

New York 11787, USA

PUBLICATION RATES FOR ABSTRACTS

	<i>Circulation</i>	<i>FASEB J.</i>	<i>Gastroenterology</i>	<i>Neurology</i>	Total
% Published as peer-reviewed papers	30.0 (30)	28.0 (28)	42.0 (42)	41.0 (41)	35 (141)
% Not published	70.0 (70)	72.0 (72)	58.0 (58)	59.0 (59)	65 (259)
Of the abstracts published in peer-reviewed journals:					
Same first and last author	15	23	34	22	94
Reverse order of first and last authors	0	0	1	1	2
% Change of authors	50.0	17.9	19.0	46.3	33.3
% Change in conclusions	0	3.6 (1)	0	0	0.71 (1)
Years to publication	1.9 ± 0.8*	1.6 ± 0.9	2.2 ± 0.9	1.9 ± 0.9	1.9 ± 0.9

Numbers in parentheses show absolute number of cases.

*Represents standard deviation.

ation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB), the American Gastroenterological Association and the American Academy of Neurology (published in *Circulation*, *FASEB Journal*, *Gastroenterology* and *Neurology*, respectively). We then searched Medline.

Of the 400 abstracts examined, 35% developed into journal articles. Publication rates varied significantly from field to field. Twenty-eight per cent of the abstracts in *FASEB Journal* were published, the lowest rate of the four journals, while *Gastroenterology* abstracts had a high of 42%. But the time to publication for the abstracts from these two journals was inversely proportional to the amount published. *FASEB Journal* abstracts were published, on average, 1.6 ± 0.9 years after the conference, while *Gastroenterology* abstracts were not published for 2.2 ± 0.9 years. Although conclusions almost never changed, either first or last authors changed one-third of the time. Again, this varied among fields. *FASEB Journal* abstract authors had the lowest turnover rates (17.9%), while *Circulation* authors changed 50% of the time.

We therefore suggest that a significant

Strassmann in the shadow

SIR — In the seven years during which the Nobel committees were thinking about the Nobel prize for the discovery of nuclear fission, a variety of solutions were considered¹.

Should the prize be awarded in chemistry or physics, to Hahn, and/or Lise Meitner, and the young Otto Robert Frisch? It is astounding that, according to the account by Crawford *et al.*¹, the other youngster involved, Fritz Strassmann, was not even considered, even though he played a key role in the discovery. It was his hypothesis that a new “transuranium element” reported in October 1938 by Irène Curie and Paul Savitch could be a mixture of the known elements radium and actinium that led to the crucial chemical experiments.

It was Strassmann who then designed an elegant chemical method which appeared to reveal the somewhat surprising presence of radium in neutron-irradiated uranium, and it was Strassmann who doubted that

1. Crawford, E., Sime, R. L. & Walker, M. *Nature* **382**, 393–395 (1996).
2. Frisch, O. R. *Physics Today* **20**, No. 11, 43–48 (1967).
3. Kraft, F. *Im Schatten der Sensation — Leben und Wirken von Fritz Straßmann* (Verlag Chemie, Weinham, 1981).

Exodus enigma

SIR — Bruins and van der Plicht present evidence¹ dating the destruction of the Bronze Age settlement of Jericho at $3,111 \pm 8$ years BP, and the Minoan Santorini eruption some 45 years earlier. Assuming that the dust cloud from the Santorini eruption caused the “thick darkness” mentioned in Exodus 10:21, and the sack of Jericho is that described in the Book of Joshua, they suggest that this coincidence of dates supports the Exodus account of the Children of Israel wandering in the Sinai desert for 40 years.

But evidence (and lack of it) from other quarters casts doubt on the reliability of the Exodus account. First, no ancient Egyptian chronicles describe events resembling the Exodus, making it doubtful whether any of the Israelites' forebears were ever slaves in Egypt. Second, the “Mountain of Sinai” described in Exodus 19:16–20 is recognizably an erupting volcano: the eruption appears to be of the vulcanian type, associated with cinder-cone volcanoes. There are no volcanoes in Sinai. In the Middle East, volcanoes that have been active during the past five thousand years are found in Syria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and South Yemen². They are all of the ‘volcanic field’ type, except for Jabal Hamman Demt in Yemen, which is a cone.

It therefore seems that the Book of Exodus contains an amalgam of folk-histories of more than one nomadic tribe originally inhabiting widely separated regions in the Middle East.

Rupert Lee

49 Rosemary Gardens,

London SW14 7HD, UK

1. Bruins, H. J. & van der Plicht, J. *Nature* **382**, 213–214 (1996).
2. *Volcanoes of the World*, 2nd edn (eds Simkin, T. & Siebert, L.) (Geoscience Press/Smithsonian Institution, 1994).