political guidelines that sustain research. In countries where funding allocations are based on peer review, these effects should be containable. Competition for the best ideas will not depend on a scientist's political or religious points of view or public perception. Where conflicts of interest pollute the management and public funding of science, as in Italy, misinformation may inspire and strengthen political interference with devastating effect, beyond damaging the research that could otherwise enhance the cultural and economic contribution of a country rich in creativity.

Where a peer-review culture is lacking, a country will not benefit from open competition for the best ideas. Negotiation between the public administration and research institutions will lead to an allocation of funds without a transparent evaluation system. Committees will finance their own members, and financial acts could assign millions of euros of public money every year to favoured institutions, according to the biases of ministers.

Such a background of patronage is fostering the political distortion of biomedical research and undermining the autonomy of science in Italy, in my view. Factors leading to the manipulation and censoring of Italian science, particularly stem-cell research and plant biotechnologies, should be analysed thoroughly. This would educate the public in the ethics of science and prevent similar situations from arising in other countries.

Italy does have excellent scientists who understand the basic concept of peer review. What is missing is ethical public-asset management. As Massarenti explains, many researchers find it difficult to accept that it is impossible to support and invest in science effectively if conflicts of interest are not eliminated. Other countries have recognized this. In 1986 Spain created the ANEP, a national

evaluation and foresight agency that is charged with selecting the best projects on behalf of ministers, regions and even private foundations. I hope that a similar mechanism will be adopted in Italy for public funding of biomedical research. The Italian government is moving in the right direction, through propositions from some of its past and current members. But a reliable peer-review system requires two things: the removal of conflicts of interest and of the suspicion that decisions may be influenced by personal interests.

The ethical dimension of science is at the core of *Staminalia*. Science's objectivity has been appreciated since Galileo Galilei, even

though for a long time it was judged as a heresy. Yet, many principles of democratic coexistence have been built on this ethical dimension. The possibility of criticizing and reviewing results is an essential part of science and of the moral and civil growth of a nation. Those attacking these values and representing science and scientists as a threat to humanity are expressing intolerance and contempt for democracy itself. ■

Elena Cattaneo is a professor in the Department of Pharmacological Sciences and director of the Centre for Stem Cell Research, University of Milan, Milan, Italy.
e-mail: elena.cattaneo@unimi.it

A blogging professor in print

Academeology: Random Musings, Strong Opinions and Somewhat Bizarre Anecdotes from an Academic Life

by Female Science Professor

Lulu: 2008. 283 pp. £9.26

As a science undergraduate, I imagined that being a professor involved little more than teaching a class each semester and 'doing research'. The inner workings of academia were a mystery to me. Since then, an explosion of blogs written by students, postdocs and faculty members has opened a new window into academic life. Blogs allow scientists at all levels to peek into the professional lives of colleagues at other institutions and in different fields.

Pseudonymous blogger Female Science Professor (FSP) first introduced herself in May 2006: "I do not look my age, I do not look like a professor, I do not look like a scientist. My colleagues are, with a few exceptions, very kind and polite to me, and some (many? most?) even like me ... but they do not take me seriously."

That post set the tone for what has become a collection of more than 500 short essays describing her experiences as a scientist, a professor and one of the few women working in her field of science. She has revealed little about her life beyond the fact that she is a 40-something professor in a physical-science department at a large US university, is married to a fellow science professor and is mother to a "tween"-aged daughter. FSP's blog has steadily gained popularity, with her clear writing style, candid revelations and often humorous musings. The blog's comment section allows her readers to share their own academic experiences.

FSP has published a selection of her essays as a book, *Academeology*. Arranged by theme, the posts are interspersed with pithy points

of academic etiquette. Many of the topics she covers, such as getting a job in academia, tips on teaching, giving seminars and writing grants, might be found in any academic career guide. But rather than give generic advice, FSP presents her own experiences in an informal and entertaining style. Writing under a pseudonym allows for candid descriptions of students and colleagues. Among the topics she covers are graduate student admissions from the perspective of a faculty member, dealing with coauthors — and advice on how not to be a 'sexist jerk'.

FSP's stories of being a woman in a male-dominated field are engrossing. She describes the casual sexism, such as being ignored or treated as a secretary by visiting scientists, or having male colleagues comment that she received an award "because she is a woman". These tales might be disheartening to some. But FSP also relates her successes as a scientist and in navigating difficulties as one half of a scientist couple who began her academic career with a young child. Never claiming that her experiences are universal or that her path has been easy, FSP shows that it is possible to have both a career as a scientist and a life outside of science.

Yet the book's strength in discussing many aspects of academic life is also a weakness. Each essay has a different audience: some are aimed at undergraduates applying to graduate school, others at graduate students or fellow faculty members. The style and tone vary between entries. And the book misses the added value of the comments associated with FSP's original blog entries. That said, *Academeology* is an enjoyable read for anyone interested in how academia works. I would have loved to have had a copy during my own student days. ■

Peggy Kolm is a biotechnology consultant based in California, and blogs at sciencewomen.com.
e-mail: peggy.kolm@gmail.com

G. NAPOLITANO/LA PRESSE/PA PHOTOS

Golden eggs symbolizing fertility were used in a campaign against Italy's *in vitro* fertilization law.