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BIO/TECHNOLOGY, 65 Bleecker St., New York, NY 10012. Telephone: (212) 477-9600. Telex: 668497UW. BIO/TECHNOLOGY, 4 Little Essex Street, London WC2R 3LF. Telephone: (01) 836 6633. Telex: 262024.

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THE FIRST WORD

A SOCIETY FOR BIOTECHNOLOGY

...the immortal spirit grows

Like harmony in music; there is a dark

Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles

Discordant elements, makes them cling together

In one society

William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*

Is it finally time for an American Society for Biotechnology? We think so, though the question is not quite cut-and-dried. Ockham's Razor, after all, dictates that "Entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity," which translates as, "Don't start talking about another society unless you really have to."

Existing societies do a marvelous job—among them the American Society for Microbiology, the American Chemical Society, the American Institute of Chemical Engineers, the Society for Industrial Microbiology, the American Society for Biological Chemistry and Molecular Biology, the American Society for Cell Biology, and a host of others.

But these are vertical groups, conforming to the boundaries of academic disciplines. They do indeed have biotechnology interest groups; some have biotech divisions. Too often their commitment to cross-disciplinary communication is tentative and incomplete—a bather testing unfamiliar water with his toe. And, since their biotech memberships are only a fraction of their total constituencies, existing societies are rightly circumspect in their public positions on key issues in the application of biotechnologies.

Biotechnology is by its very nature horizontal—a function, not a discipline. While biotech certainly draws from molecular biology, immunology, microbiology, cell biology, biochemistry, biophysics, chemical engineering, and dozens of other disciplines, biotechnology itself is all and none of the above.

Researchers who depend on a synthesis of many disciplines need a society that draws disparate orientations together.

That was the unanimous consensus of an open meeting during the *Miami Bio/Technology Winter Symposium*—that some form of trans-disciplinary biotechnology society is both desirable and necessary. A score of researchers and research managers—from academia and industry—also agreed on a skeleton charter for an American Society for Biotechnology. Its primary aims:

- To promote the sciences and technologies at the foundation of biotechnology;
- To provide the lay public, academia, industry, and government with good information on advances in, and effects of, applied biotechnologies;
- To suggest how biotech research might be guided for the general welfare;
- To provide a forum for meeting with regulators and legislators;
- To promote education and training;
- To promote regional, national, and international cooperation in education, research, and development; and
- To set professional and technical standards.

In short, to provide the balkanized provinces of biotechnology with a public forum and a public voice.

Membership in such a society should be as open as possible, the Miami caucus agreed: in fact, ASB membership should be open to anyone in any country with an avowed interest in biotechnology.

It was also unanimously agreed that any biotechnology society must seek to work in cooperation with the existing societies: just as the existing societies shy away from the breadth biotechnology demands, an ASB would find it impossible to duplicate the vertical societies' depth and experience.

Certainly, there are reservations. Would such an interdisciplinary society bleed the liveliness out of the established scientific societies? Would an ASB add to the meeting glut, rather than diminish it? Could an ASB—which would probably appeal more to industrial generalists than to academic specialists—continue to foster balanced communication and continue to draw contributions from academic scientists?

These questions deserve thorough consideration. On balance, though, we think an American Society for Biotechnology is a good and useful idea.

— Douglas McCormick

Responses to the suggestion of an American Society for Biotechnology should be directed to Douglas McCormick, Bio/Technology, 65 Bleecker St., New York, NY 10012.