

## THE PRINCE AND THE PAUPER

Although the academic and industrial approaches to drug discovery are inextricably linked, attending the major conferences for both can give the impression that the two sides inhabit very separate spheres.

This journal's intention of straddling the contrasting worlds of academia and industry can lead to some interesting juxtapositions. Fresh from the World Congress of the International Union of Pharmacology (IUPHAR) in July, that most traditional of gatherings, we find ourselves covering August's Drug Discovery Technology (DDT) meeting, the glitziest of the year's trade fairs. The focus of the conferences is of course quite different, but the attendees share a common goal — the discovery of new and better drugs — and it is the contrasting mood at the two events that makes a powerful impression. A somewhat downbeat air of critical appraisal pervades IUPHAR, whereas DDT is thick with excitement over the power of technology. Needless to say, a healthy mix of the two approaches is likely to be the key to rectifying the current malaise of the drug pipeline. But just for fun, imagine what would happen if the two audiences traded places.

So, here's the thought experiment. Take the IUPHAR attendees and transplant them to the DDT exhibition space. How would pharmacologists, famed for their integrative approach to drug action and the care they take over the definition of terms, react to the emphasis at DDT on speed of throughput and automated procedures. And reversing the process, if the DDT audience found themselves in the austere surroundings of the IUPHAR meeting, imagine their frustration at the pace of events. It's an image worth savouring, especially as both sides would undoubtedly welcome such an injection of new perspective, as everyone shares an eagerness to explore all possible routes to improving productivity. But sadly, the two groups interact less than they should, and our business is the poorer for it.

As an example of the DDT meeting's unabashed focus on processing power, take the humble microtitre plate, the workhorse of all drug-screening assays. In the mid-1990s, when spirits were high, the industry

was pushing to develop ever greater high-throughput formats for screening. By the end of the decade, the 1,536-well plate was being widely touted as the industry standard of the future, which would soon oust the 384-well plate, and most certainly the 96-well format, from their central roles in screening facilities. In fact, problems with the liquid handling in such small volumes have meant that few screens have been adapted to work in 1,536-well formats, and adoption of these plates has been very slow — they still make up less than 5% of all plates sold. Furthermore, many have realised that there is no real need to go quite so low, and are now opting for low-volume, 384-well plates, which offer the advantages that low volumes can deliver without many of the problems posed by the geometry of the higher-density plates. But, strikingly, despite its fall from grace, the 1,536-well plate still took pride of place at the booths of almost every screening company at the meeting. We're still fixated on the shiny new toys, even while admitting that technology alone isn't the answer. It's a bit like parking your Ferrari out front, and taking the bike to work.

Whereas the IUPHAR meetings are declining in size, the trade meetings are developing from strength to strength in number terms. The mood at DDT was not, however, quite as buoyant as in previous years. In this more cautious financial climate, the buyers were not feeling as liberal, and the big pharmaceutical companies were, in the main, notably absent from the arena. Stories are circulating that some venture capitalists are even returning money to their investors, unable to find young companies that they feel are safe enough gambles. Although most of us have been known to turn to retail therapy when times are bleak, it seems that even this policy has its limits. Such circumstances naturally tend to lend themselves to more reflective behaviour, so perhaps we won't need to follow Mark Twain's example of making the swap after all.

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