



Opening Address

Berlin, May 24, 1995

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London

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to welcome you all to this, the 27th Annual Meeting of the European Society of Human Genetics.

In particular, I wish to echo what Professor Passarge said at the end of his speech: 'I encourage you to establish contacts, get to know each other, to invite each other. This is the future of human genetics in Europe'.

The primary aim of the European Society is to facilitate exchange and contact between all those, throughout Europe, who are involved in the many aspects of human genetics. This includes, increasingly, the genetic support groups who most directly represent the interests of the affected families we seek to help. It includes also the commercial companies whose products, services and research play an

important part in human genetic research and diagnosis. We must use the opportunity of this meeting to continue to talk to each other – because the challenges ahead are important ones.

One challenge is to keep some sense of proportion with respect to the genetic influences on common disorders – and there is nothing better than cartoons to stop us taking ourselves too seriously. I was delighted by the idea of having a display of genetic cartoons. They provide a good feel for what concepts (and misconceptions) are well established in the 'public mind' and how genetic influences may be exaggerated.

In Britain we have had some very simplistic newspaper coverage of 'genes for criminality' and recently the Bishop of Edinburgh was saying 'God has given us promiscuous genes' and, al-

though he was not saying this absolves us from a moral responsibility for sexual restraint, the very use of the phrases 'criminal genes' or 'promiscuous genes' is leading to a rise in what Steven Rose calls neurogenetic determinism. Not only is the whole complex person being described by a single behaviour, but a sort of disembodied gene is being given the antisocial attribute as well. To explain the complex and interactive nature of the determinants of behaviour remains one of the great challenges.

Thus, the ESHG has not only to encourage collaboration between clinicians and scientists, between the health professionals and the family support groups, and to argue the case for better genetic services throughout Europe, but also to present the truth about genetics to the public.

This, in turn, means we must pay attention to teaching the teachers and the media. Human genetics is moving faster than perhaps any other biomedical discipline. It stretches from the global effort of the Human Genome Project to the hopes and

fears of individual families. If we ensure that the former always serves the interests of the latter, then we should be able to find the right path ahead.

Can I ask you to become a member of the ESHG, if you are not already, and if you are a member, to encourage a colleague to join; and please support your journal.

In closing, I wish to thank Professor Karl Sperling and the Society of Human Genetics for hosting the 27th Annual Meeting. It is your society – please support it. It is your meeting – enjoy it.