

# The hungry sheep look up

Walter Gratzer

**How to Obtain Biomedical Research Funding.** Edited by J.T. Dingle.  
*Elsevier Applied Science: 1986. Pp.56. Pbk £5.95, \$10.*

A NEW cottage industry appears to have established itself around the sleazier fringes of science in America, and I take it for an omen of the times: announcements have been appearing on notice-boards around the country proclaiming one- and two-day seminars (\$200 a throw seems about average) on how to write successful grant applications. Now it must surely occur to all takers that the performers at these events have entered the business of explaining to other people how to get grants only because they have not lately managed it themselves. They are bald men selling hair-restorer. Successful scientists will in general be too busy insuring against failure the next time round. And besides, as Logan Pearsall Smith observed, "few things are more shocking to those who practice the arts of success than the frank description of those arts".

So what have we here? This appears to be the first guide to working the British grant market, and let me quickly add that I have no doubt the three highly respected scientists, who have contributed to this slender paperback (4 mm in its covers), all have abundant grant support, and no idle half-hours to fill for pecuniary gain. What then has motivated their endeavour? Not, for the most part, any unusual luminosity of insight. Slim this volume may be, but there are still indications of a certain desperation in the efforts to give value. The kind of advice that the editor, Dr J.T. Dingle, dispenses is too often along the lines of "... it must be concise, to the point and interesting". How so? Why, doctor, because "a dull and repetitive introduction, a turgid summary and incomprehensible experimental detail will not improve the chances of even the most original idea being accepted". Four pages on we are enjoined to "try to be concise and organise one's arguments in short but cohesive sentences", and on the next page, "the summary should state precisely and clearly the objectives of the study". Well, you could have knocked me down with an RG2A application form!

Dr J.L. Gordon from the Clinical Research Centre weighs in with a chapter about the referee's view of grant applications. "What", he asks, "determines whether a referee will agree to review an application?". And he has the answer: "he has to ask himself two questions: first, is this my field? And secondly ..."; but there, I shall not spoil the impact of the

narrative by giving away any more. You must buy the book.

Matters look up with the eruption onto the scene of Professor Jack Lucy, who gives a wholly convincing and distinctly diverting account of how the deliberations of a Medical Research Council Grant Committee might go, confronted with a typical (though imaginary) application. Here are two of the eleven evaluations by the committee members. Number 7 opines that

The applicant has worked in this field for many years but of late there have been diminishing returns. It seems highly likely, unless a new approach is developed, that there is little prospect of this research yielding any observations of significance, and it is suggested that the applicant might be advised that the most likely way of obtaining a further insight into this problem is by gene cloning.

And Number 8:

The applicant has a good record of many years of research in this field but now, quite correctly, judges that — if much further progress is to be made in this area — the newer techniques of recombinant DNA technology and site-directed mutagenesis need to be employed. Unfortunately, the applicant has no experience at all in the use of these techniques . . . I there-

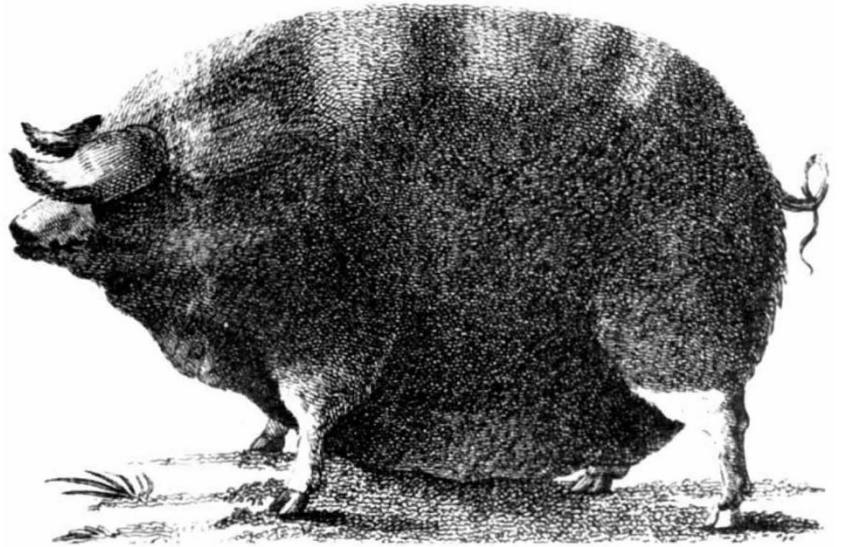
fore have serious reservations regarding the viability of this otherwise potentially-interesting project.

The ring of truth is unmistakable. This is much more the kind of thing one is looking for.

The last twenty pages of the book are by administrators, and there are no laughs but lots of information. They explain how the MRC and the private charities operate their grant systems, and an appendix lists eighty organizations that will disburse the moola when appropriately stimulated.

This small book then could with advantage have been even smaller, but it will have its uses. One question lingers in the mind: allow for the moment that such a publication as this might contain the key that will unlock the strong-room. Will it then work for the common weal? The Law of Conservation of Matter must surely operate: what each purchaser of the book collects will be snatched from you and me, and have we not all seen the undeserving flourish, yea, as the green bay tree in fact? I would incline to the view that those who cannot work out for themselves that the summary should be clear, concise and fit into the box provided, would do better selling stock in biotechnology, or even explaining to anxious young scientists How to Obtain Biomedical Research Funding. □

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*Fat pig — the illustration, from an agricultural survey of Staffordshire in 1796, is of an animal that was 802lb liveweight at the age of 2½ years. It was by no means the largest recorded. The tendency towards breeding pigs that became excessively fat at a relatively young age began in the late eighteenth century with the introduction of early-maturing foreign breeds to Britain. Because of the demands of the show-ring and the lard industry, the problem became progressively worse through the nineteenth century: one judge at the Royal Show in 1881 felt obliged to comment that "it is painful to see the prostrate masses of fat grunting and sweating under a weary life in the heat". Such opinions went unheeded, many breeds became extinct and the British pig industry suffered accordingly. The picture and historical details are taken from Julian Wiseman's entertaining and informative book *A History of the British Pig*, newly published by Duckworth. Price is £12.95.*