

MISS MANNERS MIGHT NOT APPROVE

Modern conference etiquette seems to leave little time for the critical debate that used to add more spice to scientific meetings. All this politeness might be retarding progress.

When was the last time you witnessed an intellectually satisfying debate at a scientific conference? Hazarding a guess, not recently. Of course they happen, but meetings are increasingly becoming inane polite affairs that seem to actively stifle discussion. They are often akin to a staid dinner party, at which one would rather not disagree with the host. What people say can be revealing, but best keep your thoughts to yourself in case you upset someone. We might all go home happy, but presumably also burning with frustration.

Meetings could be seen as simply a perk of the job — after all, even if they come around with unwanted frequency, they are normally enjoyable — but their main purpose must be to expose us to different perspectives. Companies and institutions tend to recruit in their own image, so exposing oneself to outside views can be refreshing. But the tendency for meetings these days to consist of a continuous string of scheduled presentations, with discussion added almost as an afterthought, reinforces the idea that it is not nice to argue in front of strangers. Undoubtedly all of these polite questioners engage in interesting debates once out of earshot, but that rather seems to undermine a large part of the point of getting together in the first place.

To counteract the trend towards this ‘not in front of the children’ attitude to debate, in 2002 we launched the Horizon Symposia as a joint initiative with Aventis. The second of these meetings was held last month, on the topic of RNA, and once again discussion was the main event. Highlights of the questions that were discussed and the conclusions that were reached at the meeting are to be found at www.horizonsymposia.com. Included are descriptions of the sessions devoted to RNA interference (RNAi) and the potential for this relatively new technology to make it to the clinic. As many meetings this year are devoted to the topic, it is a good example to dwell on. Most of these gatherings will, one suspects, give RNAi-based therapeutics a general thumbs up. Let us hope the prediction is correct, but although the mixed crowd of experts attending the Horizon Symposium were not giving

it a thumbs down, the meeting’s format gave them plenty of scope to repeatedly and forcefully emphasize the difficulties that this most popular of new approaches will face. How, for instance, will these agents get into the correct cellular compartments? This is a similar problem to that which has faced those developing antisense therapeutics for many years, so we have had long enough to rehearse the difficult questions. We should ask them.

So, in the interests of advancing science, *Nature Reviews Drug Discovery* would advocate getting a little hostile — in the nicest possible way! Having a go at each other in public might be increasingly seen as not the done thing, but that is precisely the problem. On the contrary, assertive and probing questioning should be the norm. Given a general willingness to debate, airing the issues in public is likely to get one to an answer far quicker than doing it behind closed doors. Many of us remember the fear that accompanied student presentations to some of the more traditional forums, such as the United Kingdom’s Physiological and Pharmacological Societies, where you almost expected to be beheaded by some sharp remark from the back of the room once your 10 minutes was up. Stories of the aggressive questioning that one faced at these affairs were legendary. But we probably also remember that this experience was one of the things that attracted us to science. In stark contrast, as we left an evening workshop at one of the more famous yearly meetings recently, a friend famed for his robust interrogations remarked that if the debate had been as lacklustre at the meetings he had attended as a student, he would have given up science and become a lawyer.

We should encourage cross examination wherever possible and ensure that it becomes second nature to new people entering the field. Most meetings already offer poster prizes for good presentations, so how about creating prizes for young people who ask good questions? To start the ball rolling, we will offer a free subscription to the next graduate or postdoc we encounter or hear of behaving ‘badly’ at a conference and, for the good of the subject, pushing the point as far as propriety will allow.

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