

Why not Attend a Meeting?...

... That was what our Chief Ed recently thought as soon as the last issue had gone off for print. "Yes, I should get out of the office for a couple of days. Meet some active scientists, listen to what they are currently working on, chat with them about the 'rights and wrongs' of research policy, join in railing against the ignorance of politicians and bureaucrats, discuss their visions of how an ideal researcher's life should be and, of course, to catch up on the most recent gossip from the community. I need a feel for what the most urgent issues of our readers are. In short: I need new input and new ideas."

'Field study' is what we science reporters call this and minutes later our Chief Ed was leafing through a big congress calendar. "Well," he said to himself after a while, "It seems as if, in the meantime, every single protein on which ten groups are working is worth its own separate congress." How do they get the money for all these mini-meetings? This was his last thought on the issue, when he suddenly spotted an interesting title. He searched the internet for more information about programme and participants of the meeting and finally decided, "Yes, that's it!" Best of all, the meeting was only a five-hour train journey away.

The meeting, however, turned out to be a disappointment. Of course, it was nice to see some of the old chaps again from the days when the Chief Ed had been active in research himself. And it was certainly interesting to hear about the *real* reasons behind Professor Gerrard's promotion to director of one of the largest European life science centres – and even more intriguing to learn why Professor Lampard did *not* get the job. Not to mention the story on the most recent case of suspected scientific misconduct.

However, almost without exception, the science presented in the lectures, symposia and seminars was nothing but old hat. For example, the plenary lecture by Dino Totti on the role of RNAi in the development of Antirrhinum inflorescences. The Chief Ed wasn't quite sure whether the figures were from his 2002 *EMBO Journal* paper or the subsequent 2003 *Science* article.

Or, Francois Viera's presentation at the mini-symposium on the molecular regulation of apoptosis. "Ah yes, the story of his *Cell* paper a couple of years ago," the Chief Ed thought. "Okay, he is still proud of it and, of course, those were the results that finally paved his way to becoming head of the new INSERM unit in Nizza. But hasn't there been anything new from his group since then?"

There were several talks evoking this kind of question in the Chief Ed's mind. And he wondered whether the vast majority

only talked old hat because they didn't *have* any new results or because they didn't *want* to talk too early about work which was still in progress. Did all of them really fear that their competitors would take advantage and pull ahead, if they disclosed too many of their unpublished results and unfinished projects? Or were many of them simply caught in the trap of risking possible future patent applications?

At the end of the meeting came, inevitably, the closing lecture. The meeting hosts were proud to present old Larsson who, as everybody knows, is the pioneer and decade-long dominator of his field. There is almost no important scientific prize he has not received, and, despite being in his seventies, he is still active. Only recently, his group published a broadly discussed article in *Nature*.

Nevertheless, Larsson told the audience for the umpteenth time the good old story of how he had started 'his' field almost forty years ago. Okay, it was a brilliant talk and most likely Larsson was even asked by the organisers to give exactly such a historical talk. However, the Chief Ed's conclusion had already been drawn: this meeting hadn't been worth saying goodbye to his wife and two sons for four long days.

The price he paid back in his office was stacks of paper on his desk and several dozen emails waiting to be answered. Ironically, among the mails was one from his friend Dirk van der Vaart who complained about exactly the same topic. "Today," he wrote, "Almost every presentation at a conference is about stuff you can already read in your library. Are meetings really meant solely for this purpose, merely serving as a forum for previously performed studies? Shouldn't they rather provide a stage to present and discuss new hypotheses?" And Dirk closed, "This way, meetings are only useful for meeting new people and catching up with old friends, or for planning joint cooperations. And that's why, these days, I much prefer the coffee breaks to the official presentations."

Why then not organise mere 'coffee-meetings'?

