

Editorial

What do you think about these statements?

- Research is more important than teaching
- Veterinary clinical research is more important than basic research
- Academic freedom is an anachronism

Of course you do not agree, certainly not with all of them, and one or the other may even have irritated you. “Bumper sticker” one-liners like these do not only seduce the modest mind. In the Netherlands, a political murder was their indirect consequence, when an environmental/animal rights activist assassinated the populist Pim Fortuyn. This politician’s tactics were to reduce complex political issues to commandments the man in the street would comprehend, by removing any modifier and nuance. Generalizations seem to have this effect – inducing a mental patellar reflex, causing an instant agree/reject reaction before rational analysis kicks in. Only then – and only in some – does introspection begin. The pros and cons are weighed, pondered, judged. Emotions reign even where one would expect analysis, insight and wisdom. I start to wonder when I read that “...President George Bush is angry”. I hope he is not; it could affect his reason.

Research Culture and Style

It is the citizen, the voter, who in democratic societies gives the charter to the university, and he expects new knowledge through research and, in return, higher education through teaching. Many universities take this mission seriously, as the publications and curricula show. Still there are remarkable differences in emphasis between the smallest organizational units, *in casu* the institutes and clinics of a veterinary school, college or faculty. What of the research cultures? What about the styles of research leadership in the veterinary environment? There is no general answer, of course. On the contrary, one notices profound differences between institutions.

- Whereas some give attention to the structure and organization of the local research activities, they schedule seminars, participate at work-in-progress meetings and journal clubs, and energetically support young colleagues in their scientific career - others do none of these
- Whereas some look across the border of their own field of competence and support multidisciplinary, interfaculty or interuniversity projects, stimulating

- collaboration with industry and non-academic research institutions – others do all this half-heartedly, if at all
- Whereas some attempt to raise the profile of veterinary research by participating in academies of science, learned societies, editorial boards of scientific journals and international associations – others do not.

Why these differences? And who are these “some”, and who the “others”? I refer to the holders of formal authority in both cases – the deans, chairpersons and heads of departments, the professors and research group leaders. I maintain: whatever happens at an academic research institution is a faithful reflection of these persons’ interests, not only of their scientific ambitions but *a fortiori* of their personal inclinations and aversions. These are gut reactions like that of the angry American president.

In this context we may ask ourselves: how do you become a leader in the research environment? You have been a good student, went through graduate school, wrote an impressive dissertation, collaborated with excellent teams, published in high-ranking journals and were finally appointed to the much-desired position. Now you are in charge of a complex organization, suddenly you possess – in addition to your scientific authority – formal power. It is expected that you make good use of it, show your leadership – lest you are criticized for indecision, lack of administrative competence, or *laissez-faire*. Often then a dichotomy shows between this person’s capabilities and the colleagues’ expectations: university expects the successful researcher and academic teacher to be a genius in social skills and leadership. No proof is required in advance, however easily it could have been obtained. Nobody would object if an appointment committee asked the candidate’s former colleagues about his/her friendliness, empathy, compatibility, and ability to cooperate. Competitiveness is not the issue – apparent by the candidate’s ending up on the shortlist. Once appointed and tenured, however, the competent but incompatible new boss may paralyse progress in a discipline for decades, even far into the next academic generation. I have observed the genealogy of social misbehaviour in hierarchically stratified organizations, how it proliferated ‘like an eternal illness’ (Mephisto’s words in Goethe’s Faust drama). An arrogant boss had arrogant followers: associates, postdocs, grad students and even technicians. This is true for Berlin as it is for Berkeley.

The much-quoted academic freedom, pertaining to teaching and research, is an anachronism in more than one respect. This is certainly true in cases where academia is perceived as a self-service facility for costly research projects, where a culture of *prima donnas* is tolerated – formerly known as the ‘ivory tower’ environment. I had mentioned the modern citizen who, in fact, decides whether he can afford a university. He has become increasingly quality conscious and risk aware, and our newspapers are fascinated by conflicts, fraud and politically incorrect behaviour more than in anything else. Academia has become more transparent than it was ever before and also control is more stringent than ever before – by the institutions themselves, but also by society at large: there is no liberty to tolerate obsolete curricula, poor teaching, and introvert marginal research by self-appointed geniuses. Academic freedom does not include that academics behave like absolutist sovereigns.

“Management” and “control” are terms nobody at the top of the pyramid wants to hear at universities and colleges. However, the call for more transparency is heard at all levels: from postdocs, graduate students, even from the technical staff. The historic roots of this movement reach far back.

Postmodern Age

In 1959, the photographic exposition “The Family of Man” attracted some 2.7 million Russians in Moscow, in the middle of the cold war period. The spirit of unity, of *la fraternité*, dominated the early post war period. The United Nations was founded in 1945; the Human Rights proclaimed in 1948. Industrialization began to dominate all walks of life. It expanded and progressed and resulted in today’s consumer society. Particularly noticeable in the US (and its idyllic Hollywood products), it included the animal: the collie “Lassie”, the dolphin “Flipper”, Tarzan with his primate playmates and Mr.Ed the talking horse falsified and anthropomorphized companion animals as well as the wild fauna. The longed-for ideal world, the universal harmony are characteristic of this era, which some historians interpret as a reaction to the social Darwinism of the nazis with its club law.

While all this may be true for *fraternité*, it certainly did not apply to *égalité* – there were strictly hierarchic and generally accepted structures in place, also, if not especially at universities. The consensus of the fifties did by no means include equal treatment – the frontiers were firmly defined, from apartheid to the role of women in the family. In the Modern Age, everything and everybody had a place; everything was ‘in order’. However, this notion of a world as it should be began to crumble in the 1960s, after sudden and often traumatic changes that affected politics, mass culture, art and legislation. New concepts of reality began to emerge. To draw the animal parallel again: Walt Disney’s anthropomorphic *Mickey Mouse* is displaced by Steven Spielberg’s zoo centric *Jaws*, and *Jurassic Park* is anything but idyllic. Postmodernism had started, with its unrest, its conflicts, its new system of values and standards. The American sociologist Ronald Inglehart has analysed a gigantic volume of source material and asserts about the new system with its emphasis on the environment, its respect for cultural and ethnic minorities, its progressing democratisation:

“...it de-emphasizes all kinds of authority”

“...it is characterized by the decline of hierarchical institutions and rigid social norms, and by the expansion of the realm of individual choice”.

“...the uniformity and hierarchy that shaped modernity are giving way to an increasing acceptance of diversity”

(Ronald Inglehart *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Societies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997)

In a nutshell: while the equality principle dominated the post war “Modern” period, which culminated in the Declaration of Human Rights, the Postmodern era is characterized by the acknowledgment and acceptance of social, ethnic and sexual variants and the understanding of man’s inequality.

Postmodern Research Management

Should these developments have an impact on academia? I would think so. Our colleagues and students experienced them, if only in part, and so were probably influenced by them. It would not be wise to ignore the change in climate and continue in our academic province as if nothing outside mattered, thereby confirming the conservative prejudice. This, however, is not respectable for an institution where analytic thinking should have its home, from where progress should come. Though the developments are sociologic rather than veterinary, they will affect the research landscape and need to be taken seriously by research management. We could continue to:

- Tolerate the autodidactic approach, instead of having our students taught by experts
- Do everything ourselves, instead of collaborating with scientists of complementary expertise
- Emphasize the irreconcilable difference between basic and applied research, instead of exploiting their synergy

These three examples illustrate what I have termed “personal inclinations and aversions” above:

- Autodidactism is based on jealousy
- Refusal to collaborate is based on abnormal ambition
- The moot “basic/applied research” debate carries elements of arrogance

All these are personality traits rather than the results of strategic thinking.

For achievements in science, the commitment and creativity of the researchers are of paramount importance. This is a truism, and justified only by the following line of argumentation. Our scientists are young graduate students, postdocs, assistant professors – what may have guided their choice, their decision between fame and finance? An intimate knowledge of the profession? Quite unlikely, rather a vague idea, like that of the pony enthusiast about veterinary medicine. (What young Hercules at the crossroads does not know is, for example, that science is a writing profession). Perhaps it was an insight into one’s own preferences and aversions? Or a thirst for knowledge, curiosity, and a delight in experimentation? Rather. Or may be there were guiding stars, personalities one admired, whom one happened to meet or to read about? Probably – and again personality traits enter the equation.

Once in the research arena, when first results have been presented and defended, the novice has become a scientist, and he shares this lifelong commitment (some say: neurosis) with colleagues, peers and disciples. Let me make an axiomatic statement: scientists do not need to be motivated; they are motivated ‘by default’. Still they are not

free to assume a contemplative, peripathetic life style in the warm, protected olive groves of *academia* (originally a public garden in the suburbs of Athens, named from Academus).

Which brings me to the question of management in the veterinary research environment. If you ask a professional manager about the essence of his job, he will probably quote from his first lecture at business school:

“Management is:

- Getting things done through people
- In time
- Within given financial constraints”

Today’s scientific achievements are obtained by teams – ranging in size from the student/supervisor duo to several hundred authors on a paper in particle physics. Management is important in both extremes, just as it is in the non-scientific world. Although it is the symphony orchestra (and not the conductor) that enchants the listener, and the club (and not the coach) that wins a football match, a coordinating authority is essential for success. The game of science contains many elements of serious sports, its competitiveness, targets, tactics, strategies, its necessity to win (to possess the priority for a discovery), its worldwide ranking (is yours a leading lab in its field?).

Let me focus on the first part of the trias: “Getting things done through people”.

Wherever people work in communities, interpersonal or group conflicts may emerge, which will paralyse communication and collaboration. These must be taken care of by management otherwise factions will be formed and the situation quickly deteriorates. I maintain that in research, management is not so much a matter of motivation (“scientists are motivated by default”) but of anticipating and controlling demotivating influences. Research management is sympathy management.

The gist of it

Widely different styles, different cultures of teaching and investigation reign in the veterinary teaching and research institutions worldwide. These differences are not only the result of national or local variation; they also reflect sociologic changes in time. The authoritarian style of leadership in post war universities was characteristic of the Modern Age, with its emphasis on law, order and enforced harmony. This attitude metamorphosed into the Post Modern Era with increasing acceptance of social, ethnic and sexual variants, progressive deregulation in politics and the understanding that individuals, groups and societies are unequal. Not only should academia take note of these changes, it must realize the consequences for intellectual leadership and research management. Young scientists of this millennium possess a set of values that is critically different from the standards of the previous generations, regarding the importance of family and friends, leisure activities and the harsh demands of a career track. If the working atmosphere in a clinic, institute or laboratory is emotionally stressful, they will leave. While scientists of my generation were prepared to sacrifice almost everything for

recognition by their peers, most of today's researchers are less neurotic. Still, universities must perform, must achieve, and must matter to society. The taxpayer expects professional management, and although accepting much, he will not tolerate squandering of funds as a consequence of the behaviour of incompatible egotist leaders. I should like to make the general statement that traditional research management has indeed managed research but has largely overlooked the researcher. If at all, it took care of the intellectual development of its subjects, ignoring the motivational and emotional facets of their personalities. The destructive effects of a conflict culture on creativity and achievement can hardly be overestimated. The objective must be to create understanding, if not sympathy, between research workers at all levels, from the animal caretaker to the head of department. This is not an easy task, and in my view there is only one way to achieve it: education by example.