

Case Histories: A Valuable Testament To The Importance Of Biomedical Research

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The Scientist 8[14]:13, July 11, 1994

The May 30 edition of *The Scientist* carried the full text of an unprecedented document--a consensus statement endorsed by more than 150 diverse research organizations, professional societies, corporations, and other institutions--urging increased federal support for basic biomedical research. I fully support all of the points made in this statement, and I earnestly hope Congress and the Clinton administration take it very seriously as they navigate their way to a health-care reform program that truly benefits all Americans.

I was present in early March at a meeting sponsored by Research! America, an Alexandria, Va.-based biomedical research advocacy organization, at which both the concept of this document and much of its essential content were worked out during the course of several panel discussions. The panels were organized by Leon Rosenberg, former dean of the Yale University School of Medicine and now president of the Bristol-Myers Squibb Pharmaceutical Research Institute in Princeton, N.J., and I was impressed by the format he chose to ensure that representatives from all interested research sectors had the opportunity to speak their minds.

At the meeting I attended, each panel member was given three minutes to present his or her views on what

the proposed document should cover; out of those brief but incisive testimonials grew the document published in our pages and delivered to all members of Congress two months later. The end product of the exercise clearly points out the importance of biomedical research; it sharply delineates the hazards to American society if the basic research community's needs are neglected as the health-care reform debate moves forward.

Although I felt it appropriate to present in full the final document in *The Scientist*, I also had contemplated rounding up and publishing transcripts of the Research!America panelists' three-minute statements, most of which--spoken from experience and spoken from the heart--were dramatically convincing testimonials on behalf of biomedical research.

At one point during the day, I expressed this view to National Institutes of Health director Harold Varmus--a featured speaker at Research!America's annual meeting, which preceded the consensus-statement gathering--noting that individual "case histories" are always powerful tools in bearing witness for a cause.

Researchers, I said, would greatly enhance their arguments for support if they were more forthcoming in sharing

their dramatic first-hand experiences in basic research that yielded important medical therapies.

It may surprise researchers to learn how little documentation of the kind I'm suggesting does, in fact, exist. Good examples of case histories can be found in *The Top Ten Clinical Advances in Cardiovascular-Pulmonary Medicine and Surgery, 1945-1975*, a report by Julius Comroe and Robert Dripps (Bethesda, Md., NIH, 1978); and in Joshua Lederberg's essay "Cycles and Fashions in Biomedical Research," included in a 1983 collection titled *Academic Medicine, Present and Future* (J.Z. Bowers, E.E. King, eds., North Tarrytown, N.Y., Rockefeller Archive Center, 1983).

Both presentations trace and provide analytical discussion of the origins of successful medical therapies.

In addition, among the thousands of "Citation Classics" I've published in *Current Contents* over the years, many can serve as fine models for the kind of intimate, first-person case histories whose wide dissemination I propose.

Indeed, I would like to see such case histories appear in the pages of *The Scientist*. I invite readers to send us their own stories of "curiosity-driven" forays into the scientific wilderness that eventually yielded or played a major role in the development of breakthrough advances benefiting public health. For publication, they should run about 500 words in length.

We'll see that these case histories are forwarded to members of Congress as well as presented to readers of *The Scientist*.