

From the President



We have just been through the 2008 round of Fresh Science, a program that brings young researchers into contact with the public either directly or through the media and I hope you saw, heard or read some of the presentations.

The program was started by a group of science journalists and science communicators about 10 years ago, when it was clear the demise of the ANZAAS Congresses (although not of the ANZAAS organisation) meant that we had lost a venue for scientists to communicate with a broader public. The emphasis in the new program was bringing into the limelight some science that was not only good science but had public appeal, as judged by the aforesaid media people. In its present form, Fresh Science calls for nominations of research that was conducted in Australia or by an Australian scientist, and is current or has been published or concluded within the last year or so (since 1 January 2007, in the present case). The emphasis is on early-career scientists, which is to say that researchers must be in the early stages of their career, for example honours students, PhD students and post docs. Age *per se* is not a barrier, but nominees must be no more than five years past the completion of their research degree.

The nominators are usually research supervisors or others associated with the research such as a deputy vice-chancellor (research) in a university. To ensure that the research results will stand up to scrutiny, the nomination needs to provide evidence that there has been peer review, through either publication in a refereed journal or presentation at a conference where submissions were accepted only on the advice of referees.

Contrary to the requirement for exposure to the peer group, there is a requirement that the research has had only limited exposure to the general public, for example through radio, television or print media. It's always interesting to see cases where the host institution had issued a press release but the media had not taken up the subject. Part of the application is a short statement by the nominee of how the story can be presented to the public.

The nominations are sorted out by a small team of judges, of which I have been one during the lifetime of the program. We look for good science that meets the above requirements and is likely to make good media copy, and we try to get a range of topics and geographic locations. Most of my judicial colleagues

are science journalists and science communicators with a good eye for a story. After a long struggle on shoestrings, this year the program is funded by the Commonwealth and the State of Victoria so we were able to expand a bit. Fresh Science involves bringing the (young) scientists to Melbourne for some media training, and then organising urban and regional venues for them.

This year we had 88 nominations, slightly more than in previous years. The largest group deals with biology, often medical biology, which is a great strength of Australian science, but there were also some on astronomy, earth science and IT. Our final list included items on oceanography, earth sciences, health science, agriculture, marine biology, virology, ecology, computer science, aviation and physics. All this is pretty normal, and equally normal is the almost complete lack of chemistry nominations.

I am always surprised at this because chemistry is a major research field in Australia (as judged by funding and publication) but after 10 years I suppose I shouldn't be surprised, just disappointed. The lure of the latest cancer gene or the fecundity of little furry marsupials or a pending black hole is obvious enough, I suppose. We molecule people find that hard to beat, and when chemistry is involved in a nomination it's usually the qualifier like water chemistry or biological action that gets the headline rather than the underlying chemistry.

This is not a new phenomenon. The introductory remarks before the presentation of the Nobel Prize in Chemistry to Robert Robinson in 1947 included the following remark: 'The intricate problems of organic structure are not of a nature to attract the interest of the general public. Our science is an exclusive one. You have not gained your reputation by startling discoveries, which, like the atomic fission, resound in the columns of the daily press (but) you have gradually changed our ideas on fundamental questions.'

I'm sure that the same could be said of the work of Nobel laureates in other fields of chemistry, too. A quick look in a leading chemistry journal doesn't turn up much that would make a gripping sound- or TV-bite, and in fact the chemistry exposed in such bites tends to be bad chemistry like pollution or toxicity rather than the good chemistry we should like to boast about.

If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, it seems that we chemists are largely invisible.

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