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Priority

Credit for a discovery is important to scientists, and for good reason. Nevertheless, there has always been a tendency for persons not engaged in research to adopt a superior attitude of condescending disinterest. One really should not care who was first! To some degree this attitude reflects how far removed from the actual conduct of research such people have become.

Then there are those who make rules and regulations they confidently expect other scientists to follow. Osler, for example, opined that the credit goes to the man who convinces the world, not to the one to whom the idea first occurred and who did the work necessary to establish the theory. Osler, you must remember, did not live in the contemporary world of "mass media." He would have been flabbergasted at the ability of the public press to make or break a scientist.

We all know that demanding that one's discovery be recognized or given priority calls for anything but humility. The investigator who asks for recognition soon finds himself being judged selfish, vindictive, and aggressive. Those investigators who boast that they do not care who gets the credit almost assuredly are the ones most likely to make an outcry if, in their view, their discoveries are slighted.

In my opinion, perhaps the majority of scientists are often forced into the uncomfortable position of having to claim credit for a discovery. There are several reasons for this, chief among them being uncertainties concerning publication. What constitutes a definitive publication? Is an abstract enough, or a verbal communication to a society, or an unedited photocopy published in a quickie journal? And what constitutes acceptance for publication? Some journals call the date on which the manuscript is received the "acceptance date"; others "accept" the paper only after several months of negotiation with the author.

Some journals publish papers in the order in which they are received, while others publish them when they please. Add to this the current tendency toward extreme carelessness of authors in the preparation of bibliographies and it is not hard to see why the expression "first discovered" often is a gross distortion. I find such misuse altogether too common in today's literature.

What difference does all this make? I suspect it makes a lot! A scientist's only salable stock is his reputation for doing creative work. To allow others who are more aggressive to take his work away from him is unfair; moreover, it is not, and must not be allowed to become, a way of science. The operations of science must always be correct, no matter what value judgments are made about them. Scientists must not allow a fellow scientist to be jockeyed into the position of having to defend himself. If this occurs, the fault, often as not, is the result of our cumbersome system of establishing priority.

The solution of the problem is not, I believe, too difficult. Let us agree on several simple points: (i) in order for a published paper to qualify as the basis of credit for a discovery, enough data must be presented so that the results can be reproduced; (ii) publication must be in a journal with reasonably acceptable editorial supervision; and (iii) the date of receipt and the date of acceptance of the manuscript must both appear. (iv) Lastly, let those of us who refer to the work of others, especially when we say "first," do so with more than usual care. If we do, we will all sleep better, and rightly so; *priority* will no longer be a dirty word.—IRVINE H. PAGE, Director, Research Division, Cleveland Clinic, Cleveland, Ohio