

Lasker Award Stirs Controversy

Life is unfair, according to no less an authority than the President of the United States. And few exercises are more likely to engender feelings of unfairness than the awarding of prizes for scientific research. In an age when research is a social enterprise marked both by large-scale collaboration and competition, sorting out just who should be honored for a particular development—to everyone's satisfaction—is difficult and perhaps impossible.

The 1978 Lasker Award for Basic Medical Research is a case in point. The Foundation bestowed the award on John Hughes of the Imperial College of Science and Technology in London, Hans Kosterlitz of the University of Aberdeen, and Solomon Snyder of Johns Hopkins University for their discoveries of opiate receptors in the brain and of enkephalins, naturally occurring opiate compounds. But missing from the award citation was the name of Candace Pert, a research scientist at the National Institute of Mental Health. When Pert was a graduate student and post-doctoral fellow in Snyder's laboratory, she collaborated with him on much of the research for which he was cited.

A number of people, including many of Pert's colleagues at NIMH, believe that she was unfairly neglected. Pert herself certainly thinks so. She felt strongly enough to refuse to attend the luncheon at which the awards were presented. In a letter to Mary Lasker, Pert said, "... I was angry and upset to be excluded from this year's Award. ... as Dr. Snyder's graduate student, I played a key role in initiating this research and following it up. ..."

What especially upset Pert was that Hughes, whom she portrays as a young scientist who worked for Kosterlitz just as she worked for Snyder, was included while she was not. She maintains that she would have "applauded if Sol [Snyder] had won for his many contributions to neurobiology," or even if Snyder and Kosterlitz had shared the award as the senior investigators in whose laboratories the work had been done. Snyder points out, however, that Hughes was actually an independent investigator who collaborated with Kosterlitz whereas Pert was a graduate student working under Snyder's direction.

Many people, Pert and Snyder among them, think that the jury of scientists who selected the award winners passed over Pert principally because she was a graduate student when she participated in the research in question. The graduate students who often do most of the actual research are rarely cited for their contributions when the prizes are given out. The students are simply viewed more as hands than as heads. This may or may not be the case.

There are also suspicions that Pert's sex may have militated against her selection. As Ellen Silbergeld of the National Institute for Neurological and Communicative Disorders and Stroke wrote to *Science*: "When the excluded scientist is young, and a woman, I am discouraged to think that the scientific world has not become sensitive to such practices which, however inadvertent, have the effect of being systematically discriminatory."

Exactly what influenced the Lasker jury is not known. The jury deliberations are confidential, although one member did allow that the issue of graduate student versus independent investigator did not enter into their discussions.

Perhaps the clearest thing to be said about the current

situation is that Pert and Snyder have different perceptions as to who actually originated the research and provided the driving force behind it. Pert thinks that she originated the work leading to the isolation of opiate receptors in the brain, a discovery that was the key to the accomplishments for which Hughes, Kosterlitz, and Snyder were cited. Pert says she began thinking about that project before joining Snyder's laboratory in the fall of 1970. While being treated with morphine, an opiate drug, for the pain of a broken back, she read a discussion of the opiate receptor problem by one of the pioneer opiate researchers, Avram Goldstein of Stanford University Medical School and the Addiction Research Foundation in Palo Alto. This eventually led to her opiate work with Snyder.



Candace Pert [ADAMHA News Photo]

Snyder is equally certain that he began the opiate receptor project. He told *Science* that a protocol for identifying the receptors was submitted in a grant application to the National Institutes of Health more than a year before Pert began work on the problem.

In any event, Pert is the first author on the original papers dealing with identification of the opiate receptors and also on many of the papers concerning the other achievements for which Snyder was cited. Snyder says that he thinks "it would have been appropriate if Pert had shared the award with him," but he understands how the jury for the Lasker awards might have come to their decision. He did, however, call members of the jury to ask them to consider including Pert after all, a request that was refused.

So as matters now stand, Pert is unhappy about being excluded from an award many people consider to be a forerunner of the Nobel Prize (28 Lasker winners have also won Nobels). Snyder is caught uncomfortably between a former student he describes as "outstanding" and the Lasker Foundation, which is certain to be unhappy that Pert's dissatisfaction has become public. And with scientific prizes proliferating—the prizes for cancer research that General Motors is initiating are a notable example—similar situations are sure to occur in the future.—J.L.M.