PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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Presidential Addresses published in Proceedings of the Society are probably read most avidly by subsequent presidents searching for erudition and inspiration. Those of a somewhat cynical frame of mind might see these as the only readers. However my intention today is to be less analytical than my predecessors and perhaps leaven my remarks with a more humanistic account of some aspects of animal production in Australia.

There can be no doubt that animal production can be a most enjoyable field in which to work. Close contact with creatures which are sentient (to use the in-word of the liberationists), responsive, productive and even just plain warm is a rich and satisfying experience. The sight or touch of new born livestock is enjoyed by almost all members of the human race.

Enjoyment of livestock is not however limited to the senses. The producer takes pleasure from the sight of his healthy, well cared for stock, sometimes even to a greater extent than from the sight of the cheque resulting from their production. Economists do sometimes have difficulty in accepting this fact. The national economist delights in export earnings of livestock and their products which are a major component of Australian agricultural exports (which in turn comprise in excess of 35% of our total goods sold overseas). The research worker or administrator thrills to the success of applications for industry research funds, and the research biologist be he animal scientist, veterinarian or bio-chemist enjoys the challenge of unravelling the mysteries of life and correction of their aberrations.

My enjoyment of animal production has encompassed the academic, research and administrative fields, and livestock production at the farm level, shortly to become a full-time occupation. I find I am thinking more from the perspective of the latter as each year passes.

Although we might properly complain of the less than adequate resources made available for research into animal production it is clear we are entering a new era. The piper who calls the tune has become, in many cases, the livestock farmer and he is less likely to believe that production research and the "scientific breakthrough" can solve all his production problems than he once may have.

The farmer has come to this conclusion from his own experience, and from exchanges with his colleagues who are now members of an industry which is much better organised and communicates more widely than ever before. It also seems certain that society at large has become somewhat disillusioned with science, perhaps believing that the solutions to many of life's problems lie elsewhere.

The livestock scientists themselves are bemoaning, with what appears to be increasing frequency, the fact that their research results are not always being applied; to name two very recent examples, the very low usage of national beef recording schemes, and claims of non-use of research findings aimed at reducing lamb losses. One can fully sympathise with such feelings being aware of the dedication displayed by the research workers. Claims continue to be made by the scientific community that the producers are not innovative enough, not progressive...
and generally too conservative. There have been spirited arguments as to the extent, if at all, of improvements in such well known production indices as wool cut, reproductive performance and lamb marking percentage of wool sheep over the years, and whether, if present, they are due solely to other disciplines such as pasture agronomy, soil science and animal health. This debate is to the good but facts are needed on this aspect also, notwithstanding the difficulties of retrospective research.

I want to argue today that if these things are true they are a challenge, not a cause for despondency. We should be making much more effort to find out why research findings are not being used. Personally I have the greatest respect for so many of the producers. They have probably been somewhat oversold on research and believe that the step between the research findings and on-farm applicability has been largely neglected. In all fairness it is probably equally true that the employing organisations today are pressing the research workers to publicise their findings, and even speculate enthusiastically about benefits to the livestock producer. There are risks in this. Scientists or perhaps their publicists have not always been temperate in their predictions of commercial application. One could ask, is genetic engineering to create new livestock breeds in such a category?

A very recent report in the rural press describing research at Macquarie University may be a harbinger of such needed studies. The research findings will undoubtedly be studied with great interest once they are published. The report seriously questioned that extension workers were effective other than for a minority group of farmers. In it farmers ranked fellow farmers as their most important source of information. I would strongly support further studies of this nature though the above findings, if applicable nationally, do not give me cause for concern.

Farmers so often are much more aware of the full range of factors that impact on the application of new technology than are advisors. These include labor implications of changes (an area seemingly largely ignored in importance by some research workers), economic implications, priority calls on limited capital availability, and sociological factors to name just a few. The vagaries of climate in Australia are often given too little credence. The livestock farmer has to make the judgements as to how climatic effects will affect proposed new technology, and in some areas it is the most important factor of all determining success or otherwise.

Thus any new technology should be fully costed and otherwise studied as to implementation on the farm before wide spread advocacy occurs. I regret to say that this seems to happen too infrequently. New technology advocates must recognise that increasing numbers of livestock farmers have off-farm jobs, and that any procedures which involve greatly increased mustering and handling of stock, the very opposite to what is happening in the industry, will be unattractive unless there are very large potential benefits.

These musings however are not regarded in any sense as definitive, but are part of a plea for greater study of applicability of animal production advances.

Notwithstanding such possible current problems, the incontestable fact is that although it has waxed and waned, national animal production has greatly increased over the years, and we are in some danger of unsaleable surpluses in some of the agricultural industries. Although such surpluses may not be the cause, research and advisory services are threatened with cuts, or have already had them applied. As one writer suggested "it is almost as if such services are being punished for having helped to create the surpluses". I give full
recognition to the importance of marketing and trade negotiations in such matters, but that is another story.

From the animal production viewpoint what is clearly needed is a proper balance between the resources devoted to livestock research and those devoted to evaluation and implementation of such research at the farm level. Individuals involved with both activities are now coming to accept a high degree of accountability. For the research workers, accountability is largely to livestock farmers who contribute much of the research revenue through industry research funds, and for the implementers it is to government and indirectly to the tax payer.

In order to arrive at the proper allocation of resources, and to plan suitable strategies to assist animal production, dialogue between the producers and the scientists needs to be greatly increased. This needs to take place in an open hearted manner, devoid of arrogance and with full respect for the experience of the producer. Apart from any other consideration the likely decline in total resources devoted to agricultural research and development makes it imperative for both groups to work as one wherever possible, and likewise for this Society to develop further links with other scientific groups working in animal production.

It is my firm belief that our Society, which it has been my honour to lead for the last two years, and which has possessed a very devoted group of councillors, is very well placed to build on its earlier efforts and increasingly be a catalyst for such dialogue. The results could well be a livestock industry, somewhat leaner than before, one with more realistic expectations from research, one striving for greater efficiency to counter untoward economic pressures but one proud of its performance over the years and providing an enjoyable and highly efficient work sector for both animal production workers and livestock farmers in meeting two of mankind's most important needs, food and clothing. What activity could be more important?