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Science's Next Wave

Editor: John Benditt

EDITORIAL

The Activist Scientist

The era of generous and stable federal funding of science, long taken for granted, is over. In order to stave off encroaching and damaging cuts in funding, many science and technology (S&T) leaders have strongly urged us to learn to communicate with the public and become more engaged in the political process. Although the scientific community has by and large realized that business is not as usual, our response has been spotty. We remain reluctant. Yet it is a forgone conclusion that we must become truly engaged with the fundamental issues and the politics of budget allocation. In recent years, professional scientific societies have become more involved in the political process and have had some successes (witness the FY 1996 NIH appropriation for the full year and at a higher level than that for FY 1995), but much remains to be done by scientists as individuals, and we must apply the know-how gained in 1996 to future budget allocations.

In a recent address, Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala used a telling metaphor that, in my view, constitutes a call for greater intervention by the scientific community. She said that the "activist scientist is something rarer than the spotted owl." Scientists often cite time pressures as the reason for their disengagement as citizens, but that explanation is too simplistic. More likely the problem is rooted in a limited understanding of, and general disaffection with, the political and legislative process, combined with the false perception that such activities are inappropriate for scientists or have no immediate and direct effect on one's own life. In fact, individual activism (such as letter-writing or e-mail campaigns) is not uncommon, even among scientists and academics, if the issue seems to have personal impact and urgency.

Instead of taking a defensive posture, we as independent individuals must wear the "scientist citizen" hat with confidence and purpose. To my own surprise, I have found the role to be both educational and rewarding. As a member of the Board of the Council of Scientific Society Presidents, I have been introduced to science activism. Yes, it takes time and discipline, but knowing that my actions supported my colleagues and, more important, the next generation of scientists has been gratifying. I will continue to wear this hat and encourage all of you to give it a try. The public know that they are the benefactors, but we must reassure them that they also have been and will continue to be the beneficiaries of public investment in S&T. The favorable attitudes of an enthusiastic public will ultimately result in legislative support. It behooves us to rethink the norms of science culture and give, in our own personal ways, a few minutes each week or month to support this enterprise.

In the interests of science, we must accept the necessity of playing by Washington's rules and speaking the Washington language. A two-prong approach is needed. At the "macro" level, we must establish a real relationship with our elected officials. We must let them hear from us on a regular basis, not just at crisis times, and help them to rationalize and articulate economic leadership that results from S&T investment. We must show that we can be an important constituency. Good examples of how one can effectively play in this arena are already emerging: Several professional societies provide "do-it-yourself kits" containing model letters and information about how to get an appointment, whom to talk to, and what questions to ask, along with examples of effective communication that is factual and devoid of rhetoric. Some are going farther than what I suggest here. In a recent commentary in *The Scientist*,* Eugene Garfield advocated "the establishment of a formal lobbying organization." At the "micro" level, each of us must pitch in to create broad enthusiasm through dialogue and help the public to appreciate and acknowledge that a robust S&T enterprise is key to the quality of all our lives. Our best tool is our own deep personal commitment to and excitement about science.

The stakes are high. If not now, when? If not us, who? Clearly, the responsibility is ours alone. If necessity is the mother of invention, and if scientists are unresponsive to professional evolution, then is it not time to invent a new species of scientist? I submit that we need both activist scientists and science activists.

Jaleh Daie

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