

A note of optimism

TIME really has flown, and this is the last column of my presidential term of office. I had imagined that the regularity with which I would have to write the column would be burdensome, but it has been quite the opposite: an interesting and enjoyable opportunity to think through and express some views about the Society, the profession and the discipline of psychology.

The Society's governance structures do not allow a president to be just a 'figurehead' – and there is no alternative to being directly hands-on when a president is required to chair regular meetings of Council, the Board of Trustees and the Investigatory Committee. This does allow presidents to become actively involved in policy making at all levels, and to acquire a very good knowledge of how the Society governs itself and manages strategy and policy. I have also had the opportunity to work closely with both members and staff, and have been able to strike up many new and enjoyable working relationships.

What are my impressions of the Society from this past year? My first is of a large organisation with immeasurably good intentions for the profession and the discipline, but one which manoeuvres as slowly and deliberately as a giant oil tanker. I have often said that the Society moves forward at about half the rate of most other organisations, and the reason for this is that decisions are made and strategy developed by members who have other full-time commitments to their day jobs. If the Society is going to be able to react constructively and positively to forthcoming challenges, it needs to find ways of moving forward more rapidly. This may require a greater involvement of Society staff in day-to-day decision making (and even policy making – why not?), and a move towards creating sabbatical honorary officers who can devote 100 per cent of their time to Society business.

There are clearly initiatives that the Society needs to pursue quickly and with vigour. These include attracting more academic psychologists to Society membership and promoting the Society's role as a learned society within the intellectual community. The Society needs to package and market more actively the benefits and services provided by



membership – and it needs to develop a broader range of services for members, especially in the light of imminent statutory regulation.

At the centre of the Society's objectives is 'taking psychology to the people' – this is something that we have only really scratched the surface of so far. The vast majority of lay people are unaware of the benefits of psychology, cannot conceive of its relevance within society and government, and probably still believe it is about Freud and 'trick cyclists'! The Society should be developing educational media projects at the highest level (as engaging as his TV series *Human Instinct* was, we cannot simply stand by and allow medics such as Professor Robert Winston to hijack our subject matter and present it through the eyes of another discipline).

A probable consequence of our as yet undeveloped approach to 'taking psychology to the people' is that we are still some distance from achieving the kind of active role that the profession deserves in government policy making. While parliamentary receptions of the kind held last November can make those with a say in government aware that psychologists exist, we still must work harder at general awareness of the breadth of knowledge and expertise that psychologists possess.

Despite these challenges, my final note is one of optimism. The discipline of psychology is as popular as ever, and the boundaries of its scientific and practical application continue to expand. As an undergraduate student, I was a rather

delinquent individual who failed all his first-year exams (even though I was the student union table football champion!). I vividly recall the head of my psychology department, Professor Tim Miles, calling me into his office and telling me that, against his better judgement, he would set a special resit exam for me which I would have to pass with a mark of at least 45 per cent if I wanted to continue with psychology. I got 47 per cent! Since that defining moment I have lived, ate and slept psychology, and enjoyed every minute of it – it really is such a fascinating discipline with so much to offer. Let us all work towards fully realising its potential.

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Press Committee

Media Training Days 2003

Monday 2 June

Monday 29 September

Monday 1 December

All Media Training Days will be held at the Society's London office at 33 John Street.

The days will include:

- news writing
- snapshots of the media
- media releases
- interview techniques

For a registration form and further details contact:

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ADHD CLINIC REOPENS

THE Cactus Clinic, an ADHD research, information and treatment centre in Middlesbrough, is once again open for referrals from GPs and other health professionals. The clinic closed following the death of its Director Steve Baldwin, who was killed in the Selby rail crash in February 2001. The reopening was made possible with funding from the Steve Baldwin Foundation and Overload International.

THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

THE DfES has published a White Paper setting out the government's plans for radical reform and investment in universities and HE colleges in England and Wales. The paper includes plans for the overhaul of the student finance system. A consultation period will run until 30 April. Comments can be sent by post or e-mail. See the DfES website for details and a full text of the White Paper (www.dfes.gov.uk/highereducation/hestategy).

MENTAL HEALTH ONLINE CONFERENCE CENTRE

IN March the Mental Health Foundation launches an 'online conference centre' with a consultation on the government's National Framework of Values for Mental Health. It aims to bring together online service users, service providers and policy makers from around the world.

Delegates register free online (at www.connects.org.uk/conferences), they can then move through the virtual conference centre, meeting other delegates in the 'Foyer', reading papers about the key themes and finally moving on to the discussion area. The Foyer and Exhibition areas of the website opened in February. Delegates can view papers for the conference from Thursday 20 March, with the online conference itself opening on 27 March.

Women in Parliament

OCCUPATIONAL psychology expertise has been used in political selection for the first time. Conservative Central Office has called in Professor Jo Silvester (Goldsmiths College) to assess the core competencies of an effective member of parliament, after an overwhelming proportion of its newly elected MPs at the last election turned out to be white and male.

Professor Silvester's research hit the headlines after she presented it at the BPS Occupational Psychology Conference in Bournemouth in January. 'There is little doubt that women are seriously underrepresented in British politics,' said Professor Silvester. 'They make up only 18 per cent of MPs, compared with 44 per cent in Sweden, 32 per cent in Germany, and 28 per cent in Spain.'

Although all-women shortlists helped the Labour Party to increase the number of

women in Parliament following the 1997 election, the strategy risks perpetuating a damaging belief that women need help to succeed in politics. Rather than using this sort of positive discrimination the Conservatives thought that a competence-based process would be fairer.

Christina Dykes, the Conservatives' Director of Development and Candidates said: 'On contacting Jo Silvester to discuss how the selection procedures for parliamentary candidates might be improved, it became apparent that the old system had several shortcomings. First and foremost, little had changed in nearly 30 years. It was designed to measure skills more appropriate to MPs of yesteryear. Even 20 years ago the art of debate on the floor of the House of Commons was considered the most important skill of an MP. Yet today an ability to understand and relate to a broad range of people is equally, if not more, important.'

Professor Silvester started by interviewing senior party members and MPs to identify the skills and abilities that had traditionally been associated with being an MP, and how the role is changing. Six core competencies were identified: communication skills, intellectual skills, relating to people, leading and motivating, resilience and drive, and political conviction. The second step involved using this model to train assessors in fair practice and bias-awareness.

So far 400 applicants have participated. 'Perhaps the most important and potentially influential finding from this evaluation has been that there is absolutely no difference between ratings for male and female applicants,' Professor Silvester reported. 'This challenges the notion that somehow women need help. When we implement a rigorous, objective assessment process women perform just as well as men.'

National Science Week

THE British Association's National Science Week will this year again be staging science-related events right across the UK. From 7 to 16 March thousands of people of all ages are expected to be joining in events at a wide range of venues from schools to pubs to theatres.

In Northern Ireland insects battle against eviction in the interactive show 'Bug Brother'. The Birmingham Repertory Theatre performs *Descent*, the story of a family torn apart by betrayals in their pursuit of scientific truth and genetic perfection. People can test their knowledge of science in 'The Brain of Gordon', a fun pub quiz in Oldmeldrum, Aberdeenshire, and take part in an online survey to find out the healthiest town in Wales.

Psychology is represented in various

events. For example, on Saturday 8 March the University of St Andrews presents 'The Psychology of Everyday Life'; on Wednesday 12 March there is 'An Evening of Psychology' in Reading; and on Friday 14 March clinical neuropsychologist Professor Barbara Shikian (University of Cambridge) presents 'Extreme Emotion' at the Babbage Lecture Theatre in Cambridge.

A highlight is certain to be the 'The Ig Nobels: The Annals of Improbable Research on Tour', celebrating scientific research that cannot or should not be reproduced! This six-city tour of England and Scotland begins at the Institute of Electrical Engineers, London, on Friday 7 March.

□ A fully searchable programme of events is available at the National Science Week website (www.the-ba.net/nsw).

A RISKY BUSINESS

RISK understanding is an increasingly important part of scientific and political debates. On 29 January the BPS helped sponsor an event in Parliament to discuss the initial results of a large interdisciplinary programme on the topic (www.uea.ac.uk/env/pur/index.html).

Richard Eiser (University of Sheffield) was invited to chair the event on behalf of the BPS. Nick Pidgeon and Wouter Poortinga (University of East Anglia) and Michele Corrado (MORI Social Research Institute) presented the results of one of the most comprehensive UK surveys of public attitudes towards risks of recent years. The survey focused on five risk issues: climate change, radiation from mobile phones, radioactive waste, GM food and genetic testing.

Results showed that radioactive waste remains a highly contentious case, being consistently negatively evaluated on a wide range of measures. On the other hand, genetic testing was generally seen as a good thing, although respondents still showed some level of concern. Perhaps surprisingly, GM food was less negatively evaluated than in previous surveys.

Trust was identified as a key issue in how people view such risks. Respondents did not trust the government and industry to tell the truth about these issues, being far more inclined to trust 'watchdogs', such as consumer or environmental organisations.

□ For copies of the report, e-mail risk@uea.ac.uk.

Not bowled over by sport psychology

SPORT psychology has been denounced as a waste of time by a champion international bowler. Criticising the use of sport psychologists and relaxation exercises, Ireland's Margaret Johnston refused to play in the women's home international series in Belfast.

ANDY HEADING (EMPICS SPORTS PHOTO AGENCY)

Johnston claimed that she had won her seven world bowling titles and two Commonwealth Games gold medals 'without all this nonsense'. The secretary of the Irish team said: 'We selected her, but she has withdrawn because, I believe, she thinks she should be excused training sessions.'

According to Ian Cockerill, Chair of the BPS Sport and Exercise Psychology Section, it is not surprising that one person from a squad of players does not conform to every training procedure and coaching method on offer: 'A mistake often made is that when it comes

to team sports "one size fits all" and, as psychologists, we are of course very aware of the wide range of individual differences that exist between the members of a team.'

Team officials seemed to be in no mood to compromise. 'Psychology forms an increasingly important part of preparation these days, and when you are part of a team you cannot absent yourself from part of the build-up programme,' said the team secretary.

For Ian Cockerill the episode shows the problem of dealing with groups rather than individuals. 'Applied sport psychology

sometimes precludes small group and individual work with players, largely because of perceived time constraints. Team talks and squad meetings can only progress things so far. There is no substitute for one-to-one sessions in dealing with the many performance-related issues that confront athletes in all sports.'

Meanwhile Margaret Johnston is left railing against the new training methods, including relaxation sessions in which squad members were asked to lie on towels for an hour. 'If I am going to lie on my back for an hour, I expect to be enjoying myself,' she quipped.