

## EDITORIAL

### RESEARCH

For some inexplicable reason, research, particularly scientific research, has earned reputation which is largely unmerited. To the lay mind, it conjures up a picture of the congregation of eggheads in some very profound activity which leads to events of world-shaking importance such as the nuclear fission and the organ transplant. It is true that such events have come by as a result of active research, but by and large, research is no more than the settling of a question posed most times by the curious mind of the researcher and occasionally by parties with national, commercial or industrial interest. Many of the attempts at answering never see the light of day either because an answer is not forthcoming in spite of serious work or because it has no practical value for the time being and hence attracts no interest other than that of a few fellow-researchers. It is in fact an activity where reward of fame and success come to a fraction whilst 99.9% of the rest must be content with failure, or personal satisfaction of a piece of curiosity gratified.

To do this, a researcher has to learn to set aside a good part of his time at the expense of his practice which may be service to his patients or teaching commitment to his students, and increasingly in recent years, it has become evident that systematised research takes two major forms. Firstly, it is a project study of a young researcher who is prepared to work at it for a period of 2 to 4 years resulting in a doctoral thesis; and secondly, it is a major life long commitment in a research post or an institution devoted to the problem at the expense of everything else. The former has become a favourable pursuit of young scientists soon after graduation—doctors included—and has been commented upon adversely in some quarters with remarks like the Ph.D. factory. However, it is undeniable that whilst many wasteful efforts are being made, a great deal of valuable basic information has been built up piecemeal from these unsung pioneers. The latter is practically always confined to matured and successful researchers who have already made their mark, usually command costly facilities and reasonable financial backing, and is on the whole responsible for giving the lay people a rosy and unrealistic vision of research activity. Be the effort unsung or prestigious, it is clear that research is now more and more

getting beyond service institution and teaching schools, and routine service hospitals and medical schools and Universities are finding that they are out of the main stream of research, which has now become an activity with independence.

If this is so, then it must be apparent, that in future, several changes of outlook will arise. The choice of staff in service hospitals will be biased more by the ability to look after patients, and the choice of teacher in medical schools and Universities by the ability to teach, instead of the present stress of research ability which in fact cannot find full expression in these institutions. In the development of facilities, it is necessary too, to decide whether a nation or an industry is prepared to devote a proportion of its finance to research which may provide a visible return perhaps only once in a hundred ventures, and is very much more expensive and man-power-intensive. Redistribution of cost, facilities, and personnel would again be necessary, as the unit cost of a service hospital, a teaching medical school, and a predominantly research institute with only postgraduate teaching is very different from one another.

Some will argue about a general improvement of facilities before esoteric research, because to their mind, research is not possible without the supporting basis in pure science and ancillary personnel, and hence a medical researcher finds himself at a dead end if he has inadequate biochemistry, radiology and pathology, to name but a few. Whilst the argument superficially has apparent merit, for indeed a building can only come up with a complete foundation, but to stretch the argument to say that no development in research should be contemplated without a generalised nationwide improvement of all other facilities would be like saying no monumental structure can be undertaken unless all housing problems are solved! Research is an activity with certain drawbacks and benefits, and one cannot expect the benefits without facing the drawbacks. Short of preparing to accept a redistribution of facilities, manpower and cost, research can come about only in name, like an empty mirage with no true substance.

**Gwee Ah Leng**