

An occasional column, in which Mole and other characters share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Correspondence for Mole and his friends can be sent to [mole@biologists.com](mailto:mole@biologists.com), and may be published in forthcoming issues.



## Poster prize

Oh this is just great. I'm in a really nice town, at a really terrific institution, and I was invited by the graduate students to be their special speaker for their retreat. I mean – how cool – I feel really special, and I really, really appreciate it. (Of course, it also makes me feel really, like, *old*, and way too much so to say things like 'like, old'.) But yeh, it's cool. And we've been having a great time talking science and talking *about* science, and fitting in some lovely meals, and then there was this *thing* that happened. I want to talk about it.

I was looking at some posters the students had prepared to summarize their work, and these were very interesting and showed a lot of effort (and yeh, we are talking about science a lot), when suddenly a very sincere faculty member took me aside and told me that my job was to pick the best one for a price. Nice thing, right?

We're all having a good time, sharing our thoughts and observations, and often getting into deep discussions, and why not celebrate by picking someone who's work gets special mention, and maybe something like a good book or a check for money that could help them buy something like a good book (or, I don't know, rent?).

But I couldn't do it. Be the judge and pick the 'best poster.' I had to tell them that if they ask me, I want to take the prize (whatever it is) and divide it among everyone who participated in the event, in recognition of their efforts. There was no 'best.' (Well, apparently there was – as selected by the faculty – and I was a good sport and presented the award, but I was trying to make a point.)

My friend, Professor Ferret, has a different perspective on this. He notes that while trainees make a terrific effort to prepare and present their posters, it is much too common that speakers

and faculty types don't look at them. But if there is a committee of said faculty who are judging, at least *they* will look at each one and spend some time going over them. And the winners get something to put on their CV's (not to mention calling home with the nice news). He has a point, and I confess that I'm guilty here – I *want* to look at these posters, really look, but too often I'm collared by someone who wants to talk, and the time just gets away from me. My bad (and yeh, before you say it, I know I'm too *old* to say 'my bad').

This problem, the tendency to set up poster sessions at meetings and then attend them poorly is real, and I'm not sure that giving out a prize actually does much to fix it. The fact is, we generally have these sessions at the end of a long day when, more often than not, we're a bit brain dead, or have them squeezed in between intense groups of talks, when we'd prefer a bit of a break (and therefore, we treat the posters as a break).

So here's a thought: Why not schedule poster sessions at a time when we might be alert and fully prepared to put the time in to properly view and discuss them? Really. Almost every scientific meeting I attend is set up with talks first thing in the morning. We might break at lunch for a while, often a *long* while, and then we do posters either before or after another series of talks. How about this instead? Follow breakfast, not with sitting in a darkened room, but instead with posters in a nice, bright space, and discuss these until lunch. Then start the talks. If I'm then too tired to follow some of the talks later on, that's my loss, but at least I've put some of my time into giving posters their due. And you know what? Most of the cool stuff in the posters is unpublished, so I reckon its win-win. You're probably sceptical of this idea, as was I – until I tried it. And yeh, I *liked* it. You folks who organize meetings might want to try it out.

But I digress (I know, so unusual of me). We were talking about prizes. Even if we justify poster prizes as Professor Ferret does, how can we justify all the other prizes we hand out in science? Can we?

Of course. We hand out prizes for everything else in the world of human achievement. 'Best' book, play, music album (pick your medium). Best screen adaptation based on an idea in a short story not involving chipmunks. Best restaurant, best lumpfish caviar, best photograph

of a chipmunk. Best chipmunk (almost always Alvin, but I keep hoping for Theodore).

But almost all of these awards are different from awards in science for a basic reason. These other awards translate into an increased commercial success in a business that relies on a paying public. We might go to see the Best Documentary in a Foreign Language and pay money for the privilege (or rent the DVD, at least). But if the winner of this year's Best Cardiologist Under Forty is speaking at a meeting, we don't buy tickets (or even her latest paper). It doesn't work like that.

But here's how it does work. While the winner of this year's Best Performance by an Actor Playing the Part of a Chipmunk (probably Alec Baldwin) would never be considered an expert on chipmunks ("Mr Baldwin, what should we think about the role of rodents in the debt crisis?") *any* scientist who wins a major award is considered an expert, not only in their field, but about *science in general*. In fact, they are taken seriously on all topics, because the public (who, yes, are a *paying* public) want something out of this. And our prize winners are often the ones who are very happy to give them what they want, regardless of whether they have anything to offer.

I'm not kidding. William Shockley, who received a very revered scientific prize for his work on the transistor, decided that he needed to tell the public about his cherished idea that skin color determines intelligence and, therefore, society should sterilize individuals whose pigmentation does not conform to his model of what is good for humanity. Despite how completely *stupid* this idea is, and how utterly unsupportable by any sort of science, serious people took him seriously – enough so that, when I was a young mole, I participated in an angry protest of a talk he was to give at a prestigious university, where he had been invited to share his views (and not on transistors). It still makes my old blood boil.

But surely it is simply human nature to want to honor achievements, and celebrate those who have done well. And a great deal of my venting could be mere jealousy on my part, since I will mostly probably *not* be taking home any such honors (the chances that I will are roughly those of me being hit by a meteor – not something I think about overly much but, yes, I admit it would be pretty awful if both were to happen on the

same day). Okay, I *do* admit that I would love such a prize, actually *any* prize that says "you like me, you really like me!" It's a *nice* thing.

But we need to be a bit realistic, here. Too many folks I know become fixated on such recognition, to the point that some of them work very hard to get it, even to the point of rewriting history in their own favor. As though the prize actually *changes* the reality, that we do not do our science in a vacuum. We work together, even in those cases where there is considerable resistance to our ideas. And somehow things move forward, even when there isn't major recognition of the work. It would be a pity if we were to lose sight of *why we actually do this*. It isn't for a prize. It isn't even for grants, although these feel like prizes, and allow us to do what we do. I hope I don't need to spell it out.

Which brings me back to the poster prize. Although there is no obvious harm in letting a single student take home an award for best poster – and little danger that said student is suddenly going to go off the deep end and argue that all transistors should be destroyed (or even that the inventor of said transistors should be sterilized). But I think it does send a message that is not intended, but pervades our society: That we do this for recognition and honors. I don't think you can last very long in this business if you do feel that way, even a little.

The Scarecrow won a diploma, the Tin Man won a clock, the Lion won a testimonial, and Dorothy won a one-way ticket back home (where she'll never leave, ever, ever again). If I go looking for my heart's desire, I won't look further than my own little lab, because if it isn't there, I never really lost it in the first place. Or my name isn't Oz.

Which, of course, it *ain't*. But then, I suppose I'm just angry because a house fell on my sister. And as the Scarecrow pointed out, "Some people without brains do an awful lot of talking, don't they?" Don't pay any attention to me, the prizes will still go out, and we'll keep celebrating them, and complaining about them, and we'll go on. So, Wizard, look in your bag and see if you have anything in there for *me*? No? Oh, well. Now let's think about something *really* important. Me, I'm going to go look at some posters.

*Mole*

Journal of Cell Science 125, 529–530

© 2012. Published by The Company of Biologists Ltd  
doi:10.1242/jcs.105577