

## Our prime vitamin : international peer review

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## **PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS, EORS 1995**

### **Our prime vitamin: international peer review**

This is the first formal Presidential Address in the history of the European Orthopaedic Research Society. In view of my resignation in Munich, it will also be my only one. But I do hope that it will be taken up by future Presidents, to become an annual tradition. Why? Because the EORS has a mission to fulfill and the President should be its prime ambassador.

Our mission is, in short, to strengthen the scientific basis of orthopaedics in Europe and promote the participation of orthopaedic surgeons and residents in high-quality research. The most important requirement to accomplish that, in my opinion, is to develop a culture of international peer review. The American ORS has been quite proficient in fulfilling a similar mission, using peer review as its principal tool, to the extent that many European scientists find their peers there. I have nothing against that. At the end of the day, orthopaedic research and treatment are world-wide affairs. However, in order to participate, and indeed compete, on a global level, we need a home reference base of sufficient substance and consistency; our countries are too small to provide for the former, the world is too large to ensure the latter. Europe, like the USA, is just the right size, but lacks the necessary consistency and organization.

In order to enhance the quality of European orthopaedic research at large, the restricted funds available must be devoted to the best research proposals. The professorships should go to the most able minds. The limited number of pages in scientific journals should be filled by the

superior articles. Only experts can ensure quality. Because orthopaedic research is so diverse and multi-disciplinary, only a handful of real experts in Europe will be found for any given subject. This is equally true for the US. However, one can not escape the experts in the US. Whereas in Europe, selections are usually organized on a local, national basis, which lacks the necessary expertise. And if not, which expert in, say France, does really care on which research proposal the, say, Danish government will spend its money? This often favors the politically, but not necessarily scientifically, strong groups. In the end, that does not improve the reputation of European orthopaedic research in the world, which hurts us all. Many years will pass before the European Union has been regulated such that effective international peer review is inescapable. So, for the sake of our profession, we must organize it ourselves.

We must learn not to shy away from critique, but rather invite it. What better service to a friend than to shred his research proposal to pieces so he writes a better one next time? To develop this attitude is not easy and will take time. If we find enough food in the village, do we roam around the countryside to find better quality or do we stay put in order not to risk its availability? Although we all know that international competition improves our own strength in particular and that of our field in general, it also provides a potential threat to our individual survival. The Society can provide a European structure to accommodate solutions for this contradiction.

In order to accomplish that, we must build a network of communication and collaboration between peers, and we must provide it with a strong internal and external profile. The members of the EORS should become aware of who is doing what, and where, in Europe. The Executive Committee should try to provide that information. What methods of patient evaluation or experimental measurements are available? This information can generate international cooperation among members, and it can also attract new members. Advertising externally can draw Ph.D.'s from related sciences into the Society. Their association with orthopaedic research is crucial for the maintenance of quality in a broader sense. Profiling the Society for national and EU science committees, and government agencies is another way of

reaching our goals. And so are the organization of conferences and workshops, the institution of Awards and student travel grants. The creation of our own scientific journal, I believe, could be very instrumental in advancing our cause. It institutes a culture of peer review, develops our internal profile and expands it versus America and Asia. The Society will need all its talents to realize these plans.

A crucial prospect for the Society is its relationship with EU funding programs. These require exactly the international and multidisciplinary co-operation which the Society wishes to promote. Whereas this is a seemingly fortuitous co-incidence, the EU and the EORS are not presently tuned to realize this goal in concert. Our laboratory is now involved with 6 applications for EU funding; the more bullets, the more chances for a hit. A number of these applications (and many others I have seen), when read carefully, do not so much transmit the message that the applicants wish to solve a scientific or clinical problem, but rather that they wish to obtain European money. This will not always escape the European bureaucrats. It hurts the reputation of our field, and thus the EORS. I know of funded European programs in the field of orthopaedic research, of which the directors and participants have never published anything in the international, peer-reviewed journals which even remotely suggests that they are capable of solving the problems they promised to address. I know of EU-funded programs with participants which are included not because they have a particular expertise, but only because they live in a politically interesting region. This may all help to empty the Brussels treasury, but it does not really promote our scientific cause. We can change this culture along two avenues. First, representatives of the EORS should become privy to referee circles in Brussels, which is in fact happening. Second, the EORS should promote and monitor networks in which funding proposals can be developed, based on high-quality research which makes sense, and composed by the right groups. This, in fact, could easily be realized by appointing a EU-funding review committee in the EORS. Any volunteers?

What is orthopaedic research? This is a difficult question and an important one as well. It is difficult because modern orthopaedics is relatively young, and so is its scientific basis. Its multidisciplinary nature makes it hard to delineate. It is important, because we must compete in research funding against the mainstream in medicine. What can help us here besides quality, is a clear profile. I see this profile in two main issues. One is related to the evaluation of orthopaedic treatment. Patient outcome studies, prospective trials, developments in measuring methods of musculoskeletal function, development of preclinical tests all fall into this first main category, which lends itself well for profiling. The second main category could be based on what I see as the emphasis of orthopaedic treatment: *to create the biological and mechanical environment for the musculoskeletal tissues which allows them to heal, adapt or maintain themselves towards optimal function.* This description couples functional musculoskeletal and systemic factors at a distance, but nevertheless directly, to tissue fitness and cell biology. It illustrates the complexity of orthopaedic research, motivates its multidisciplinary nature and illustrates its relationships to the basic sciences. It also unites the diversity of biomechanical, biomaterial, biochemical and cell-biological research in one general scientific scheme for a clinically oriented goal. The question is, how does one summarize it? Orthopaedic patho-biology? Musculoskeletal mechano-biology? Any volunteers?

The EORS was born in hard labor, but eventually came to life healthy. It survived its infancy and must now be nurtured to adulthood. I believe that its principal diet should be European peer review. Albeit imperfect, it is the only system known to produce results. Its development, our association with EFORT and the dedication of our officers and members will create the optimal conditions for our mission. I wish the new President and his Executive Committee all the strength and wisdom they will need to accomplish it.

Rik Huiskes, PhD

President EORS