

Ramazzini Award 2011

Overture

Cari colleghi ed amici

Sono stato toccato dal vostro spirito generoso sull'apprendimento che ero stato nominato per questo honour Non mi sono veduto mai nell'azienda di tali notevole come Alice Stewart e David Rall.

Dear colleagues and friends

I was touched by your generous spirit on learning that I had been nominated for this honour. I never saw myself in the company of such worthies as Alice Stewart and David Rall.

È più di un aspetto del protocollo soddisfazione che richiama l'elogio dei nostri ospiti: I possiede francamente al indebitamento al comune posteriore di giorno dei Carpi per l'ospitalità che generosa ha preveduto circa trenta anni. Né può uno trascurare i loro predecessori che entrano per elogio per intrattenere un grande medico di Settecento secolo che continua a servire da modello nel ventunesimo.

It is more than a matter of satisfying protocol that prompts praise of our hosts: I sincerely own to indebtedness to the latter day Municipality of Carpi for the generous hospitality it has provided for some 30 years. Nor may one overlook their predecessors who nurtured a great 18th century physician who continues to serve as a model in the 21st.

“Vesti la giubba”.

The Collegium's Founding Fathers and its future

"Concerning the Collegium's Founding Fathers and its future."

On being honoured by the Collegium, I can do no better than commemorate its Founding Fathers and to review their aims. Under the mellowing influence of the grape, it has been a custom at conference dinners for Fellows of the Collegium to reminisce about Irving Selikoff and Cesare Maltoni. Sober as a judge, I take this opportunity to recall the circumstances under which I first met our Collegium's begetters. If I seem to dwell too much on Irving Selikoff, in mitigation I offer that Morando Soffritti and Fiorella Belpoggi, published: "...Remembering Cesare Maltoni", only last year.[1]

Once upon a time, that is during an official tour of America some 40 years ago, Dr Trevor Lloyd Davies, the outstanding Senior Medical Inspector of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Factories,[2] visited Irving Selikoff at his new Environmental Sciences Laboratory in Cummings Basic Sciences Building. The hail fellow well met Brooklyn Boy and the reserved British physician, for all their apparent differences had much in common, robust intellects, forceful characters, drive, and a commitment to medical ethics.(They also shared the rare talent of being able to suffer the author gladly.) Both holding the view that asbestos was the major public health problem of the 20th century, had independently inaugurated substantial investigations into the adverse health effects of asbestos, Selikoff with his insulation worker studies,[3] Lloyd Davies with a total national industry study.[4] Occupational health was burgeoning in America and Britain in the early 1970s and the time seemed propitious for transatlantic collaboration in this field, so Lloyd Davies arranged with Irving Selikoff and Hans Weill for a member of his staff to be seconded to their units. Both hosts proved to be patient with their argumentative guest.

Life with Selikoff was never dull, by the time that he had eased himself out of his Cadillac in the morning and arrived at his desk, his lucubrations had generated enough work to occupy several secretaries and included a slew of proposals for health research and intervention. The North American asbestos industry's public relations experts, driven to distraction by a physician, well thought of by most of his peers, and a gift for the media what with his persona, powers of exposition, and talent for producing effective sound bites, tracked and attacked him assiduously. When he gave an unscripted talk at a conference, it was

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recorded and a transcript was promptly circulated within industry.[5] There is reason to believe that Selikoff's 1974 Thetford survey was shadowed by industry; evidence for this is that two questions were asked in the UK Parliament, asking for an explanation for the presence there of a British civil servant.[6]

Selikoff could hold his own in polemic, reducing his more intemperate adversaries to ad hominem attacks, that questioned his scientific prowess, his sanity, his motivation and funding. Conspiracy theory went so far as to state as fact that his claims of having had a medical education and of being qualified to practice Medicine were fraudulent. Proposals for ridding America of this turbulent physician stopped short of physical assassination, but included: a proposal to report him to the State Medical Board questioning his fitness to practice; having a Wall Street attorney send him a threatening letter; complaining to the Board of Mt Sinai School of Medicine; threatening the New York Academy of Sciences if they published him. In the event nobody reported him to the State Board, the attorney letter did not get beyond a first draft that was as threatening as a damp sheep, no record has been found in Mt Sinai Board archives of an approach, and the Secretary of NYAS replied in an uncompromising manner. Wiser heads in industry ruled against these suggestions, and advised the company doctors to defeat him in a public disputation, which they wisely declined.

Pursuit of Selikoff was to continue beyond the grave; several years after his death industry still considered it worth while funding an academic historian generously, to repeat an earlier canard about Selikoff's medical studies and fraudulent qualifications:[7, 8] at stake were billions of dollars involved in the pursuit of claims for compensation.

Canada has a long tradition of denying that asbestos had serious adverse health effects on Quebec's miners and millers. In 1912 the official view was that its miners and millers had superlative health.[9] In 1930, the Clinical Director of the Department of Industrial Hygiene at McGill University examined several small groups of miners in Asbestos and in Thetford and reported finding abnormalities but held them to be of no significance, further asserting that no case of pneumoconiosis had been reported from

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asbestos in Canada. [10] McGill was to continue to feature largely in the Canadian defence of its asbestos industry, [11]

Even when out of the blue in 1955 Thetford mine's medical officer reported finding 128 of some 4000 to have asbestosis of various degrees of severity [12] he gave the reassurance that asbestosis was a disease which can be tolerated quite well for many years, and only looked serious if "...a too scientific medical concept or a too liberal social interpretation is accepted by medicolegal professions, labor and compensation bodies...". McGill's Quebec Asbestos Mining Studies covering the period 1962 -1992 concluded that under current conditions any hazard would be of a low order.[13]

In 1974, some Quebec miners being less insouciant about their health experience, asked Selikoff to study a population of Thetford's asbestos miners and millers including a number of retired workers. A standardised questionnaire was administered for determining respiratory signs and symptoms, ventilatory capacities were measured and PA chest radiographs read to the ILO standard. The findings confirmed Union impressions, and were subsequently to be treated as authoritative by two official Canadian inquiries into matters of health and safety arising from the use of asbestos, the one chaired by Judge Beaudry in 1976, [14] the other conducted by the Ontario Royal Commission in 1984. [15]

It was not for the want of trying that no US/UK collaborative studies came to be initiated. Occupational Health practice had taken off like a rocket in the US and the UK in the early 1970s, but like a rocket it briefly corruscated and returned to the state pro ante.[16,17] In a discussion I had with Margaret Becklake at McGill University, we agreed that the perceived polarization of Irving Selikoff and Corbett McDonald in relation to asbestos was not in the public interest. Reconciling their findings we hoped would concentrate efforts for prompt protection and thwart the stratagem for delay that advocated waiting until the experts agreed.

For comparing and contrasting the chest radiographs obtained in their studies, it was proposed to employ the UK Panel on Chest Radiography that had been established to score films according to the ILO/UC standard, in the UK national study of asbestos workers. Selikoff and McDonald considered this proposal and arranged to meet on neutral ground in

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Albany NY. They met but regrettably only a press statement came of it; a commedia del arte battle of the White versus the Black Knight was to play on.

Vinyl chloride monomer (VCM) introduced me to Cesare Maltoni. Initially accepted as *merely* narcotic when reaction chamber cleaners went into coma and required to be rescued, VCM was later acknowledged to cause disabling acro-osteolysis and then in the early 1970s to cause angiosarcoma of the liver. When Maltoni reported VCM to be tumorigenic for Sprague Dawley rats at a few parts per million, to mix metaphors his rats' Zymbal Glands put the cat among the chemical industry pigeons. The significance of this "inconvenient" observation was dismissed by industry and its scientists on grounds that: only one species was involved; the animals were fed in the exposure chambers; they were diseased; the zymbal gland has no homologous organ in Man. Further it was hinted that the physical conditions of the laboratory and the conduct of the research were poor. I was instructed to introduce myself to Maltoni and duly received an invitation to visit his establishments in Bologna,. The main burden of coping with me was placed on Morando Soffritti's then slim young shoulders. He took me to the Castello di Bentivoglio, which turned out to be neither a romantic nor a sinister Gothic ruin, but rather a well adapted building equipped with modern animal research laboratory facilities. The systems for caging and exposure, and the records kept on the studies, including, exposure histories, routine Veterinary inspection reports, postmortem protocols, archives including post mortem reports, tissue blocks and slides, constituted a punctilious regime well before the term "Good Laboratory Practice" came into vogue.

Irving Selikoff and Cesare Maltoni were treated in the classic manner as bearers of ill tidings, so much so that even merely associating with them was hazardous. For anyone with the ambition to succeed in climbing the greasy pole of professional advancement, joining their Collegium would not have been the shrewdest step. The brief annual face to face contacts of Fellows in Carpi however, provided an important morale boost. Additionally, members of the Collegium contributed to an international network of independent scientists ready to come pro bono to the defence of individuals, and provide support to United Nations agencies threatened with subversion. Although this network has

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operated outwith the Collegium, it can be considered as an important part of the Selikoff and Maltoni legacy.

The Collegium has yet to achieve its full potential. Maltoni and Selikoff shared a work ethic and liberal humanitarianism, and while their ambition for the Collegium was unlimited, its achievements were bounded by the constraints imposed by its world-wide membership and modest funding. Generously supported by Italy, its limited Secretariat has allowed for one meeting a year and a little activity in between. In the 1980s, the Communication Technology that was evolving had the potential for overcoming the Collegium's serious organizational problems. One of its Fellows, Gordon Atherley, offered to apply Information Technology to the Collegium's communication and organizational problems, but unfortunately owing to a change in his circumstances this was not pursued: Charlie Xintaras was to produce a web site and Jill Brazier inaugurated e Mail facilities.

Writing as General Secretary, Maltoni looked back on the achievements of the first 20 years of the Collegium as including: several important conferences; an annual forum; several widely appreciated scientific publications; statements on some urgent and major environmental and occupational health hazards; interaction with several national and international institutions and academic bodies. [18] He was however far from satisfied

“The Collegium is therefore planning a second stage of its life, with expanded programmes, which do not necessarily require an expansion of the statutory number of Fellows, but rather the careful search for synergies with national and international academies, institutions and agencies.” Unfortunately he was not to survive to see his plans realised. When in 1999 independently I had the audacity of addressing the Giornate Ramazziniane on the subject of the Collegium's future, it proved that Maltoni and I were of one mind. [19]

Earlier, Barry Castleman gave an account of conspiracy and incompetence at national and international levels in the formulation of standards in Occupational and Environmental Health. [20] He called for members of the international scientific community to exert greater vigilance in trying to maintain scientific objectivity in the United Nations Agencies (IPCS, ILO, WHO, WTO etc). At a time when Charitable Foundations are neither

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willing nor able to make good the shortfall in government financing of research, it would be understandable if academics practiced self-censorship in order not to provoke potential funding bodies, leaving it to Castleman's mavericks to serve as their social conscience.

When Maltoni advocated that we work with national and international academies, it may be understood that formal connections were to be restricted to institutions above suspicion. The Collegium has never required its Fellows to withdraw from membership of the other sort of organization, recognizing the potential for them to ameliorate them.

In keeping with Maltoni's aspirations, in May 2006 the Collegium was admitted to the special list of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) of the International Labour Organization (ILO), which qualified it to receive earlier warning of problems arising in the consultation process. The constitution of the working groups of the UN agencies, WHO, ILO, IARC and IPCS, allows for interested parties to attend as Observers.

UN agency officials give the impression of genuinely welcoming NGO representatives to their meetings and working groups, if for no other reason than that by their presence the proceedings are rendered transparent. In the event of the chairing of a meeting becoming lax and providing Industry observers with the opportunity of obtruding into the deliberations of the committee, the NGO is there to see fair play. NGOs cannot match the financial resources of Industry, and for all the value of their presence at its agency meetings, the UN does not reimburse travel and subsistence expenses to impecunious NGOs. There is however, no need to match industry Observers on a one to one basis: even if a dozen industry representatives appear a single wide-awake independent observer can act as an effective counterbalance. NGOs sharing interests can unite to sponsor a single representative to represent them at a meeting, a further example of *synergy* to which Maltoni referred.

The Collegium's Fellows cover a wide range of expertises that would qualify it to function as an active NGO in a number of areas, and to collaborate fruitfully with sympathetic institutions in the fields of Occupational and Environmental Health. The full exploitation of modern communications and data handling would allow the Collegium to be active at all levels throughout the year, provided its administration and funds were augmented.

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Selikoff and Maltoni were determined that the Collegium should never find itself in the pocket of a major donor. With this constraint, if it is to realise their ambitious aims it requires to approach a suitable foundation. In addition to details of the programmes of work for which support is sought, and records of past achievements, trustees will doubtless wish to study the Collegium's Constitution, and audit. An attempt to revise the Constitution was short lived for a variety of reasons, but if a suitable trust can be identified, an unofficial approach to trustees of an acceptable charity would determine the extent to which the Collegium need put itself out in reforming its Constitution and in obtaining an unqualified audit if it is to be able to finance a modest expansion.

For an organization to remain vibrant it helps if it maintains a healthy proportion of energetic young members. The low natural wastage of its robust or robustly infirm Fellows of which a number are guilty, and the pattern of recruitment, have militated against the Collegium achieving a balance in terms of age and geography. With the number of Fellows on the Collegium's roll pegged at 180, the aims addressed to age and geography can only be achieved, if as "Sleeping Fellows" are culled, positive discrimination is applied to achieve the desired age and geographical distribution.

I am indebted to the Collegium for its moral support that saw me through some , "interesting" times and am overwhelmed by its award of its honour.

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The Last Word

Matthew Arnold

(1822-1888)

Creep into thy narrow bed,
Creep, and let no more be said!
Vain thy onset! all stands fast.
Thou thyself must break at last.
Let the long contention cease!
Geese are swans, and swans are geese.
Let them have it how they will!
Thou art tired: best be still.
They out-talked thee, hissed thee, tore thee?
Better men fared thus before thee;
Fired their ringing shot and passed,
Hotly charged - and sank at last.
Charge once more, then, and be dumb!
Let the victors, when they come,
When the forts of folly fall,
Find thy body by the wall!

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- 6 House of Commons Written Answer 16 June 1977.
Mr Max Madden (Sowerby: Lab) asked the Secretary of State for Employment if he will make a statement outlining the circumstances in which the Employment Medical Advisory Service assisted a team from Mount Sinai Hospital, New York, in a clinical examination of workers in the Quebec chrysotile asbestos industry; and what were the main conclusions of the study. House of Lords: Written Answer 14th March 1977. Lord Avebury asked Her Majesty's Government: In what capacity a physician employed by the Employment Medical Advisory Service attended a clinical examination of miners and millers at the Thetford Mines, Quebec, Canada, in November 1974; what report was made by the physician on his visit, and to whom; and whether it is to be published.
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