



# comment an april diary

I have never quite fathomed why T.S. Eliot began *The Waste Land* with 'April is the cruellest month' although April 2009 has certainly ended cruelly with the unseasonable emergence of Mexican 'flu.

**1 April.** In Harrogate for the Spring Meeting of the SGM. It was my privilege to introduce the first recipient of the SGM Prize Medal Lecture, Stanley Prusiner from the University of California, San Francisco. In 1982, Stan isolated prion proteins that induce spongiform encephalopathy and was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1997 (see *Microbiology Today*, February 2009). Stan's fascinating story ended with his current research on inhibitors of the protein conversion process. The day included a mini-symposium on prion diseases with British contributors. The UK is at the forefront of research in this field, as well we should be, having generated mad cow disease and its human form, variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. The notion that 'infectious' proteins lacking nucleic acids cause scrapie seemed preposterous when Tikvah Alper *et al.* first postulated it in 1967 and had it been published in *Nature* on April 1st rather than May 20th it might well have been regarded as an April Fool prank.

**3 April.** In Liverpool to give the Keynote Talk at the Annual Meeting of the British HIV Association. The reason why I had been invited to speak to 500 AIDS physicians was that my laboratory had collaborated with Sunil Ahuja's in Texas on Duffy antigen receptor for chemokines (DARC) as a risk factor for HIV. Our paper last year claimed that people who lack DARC on red blood

cells are more likely to become infected by HIV. As 90% of sub-Saharan Africans are DARC-negative (it confers resistance to vivax malaria) we attributed 11% of the African AIDS burden (some 2.6 million HIV-infected Africans) to this genetic risk. In other words, prehistoric selection for resistance to malaria appeared to make Africans more susceptible to HIV today. My problem was that other groups cannot confirm our results. I presented our data but announced that the findings had become controversial.

**19 April.** Lago d'Iseo, Italy, for a small workshop on HIV infection of macrophages. It is the best kind of specialist meeting, intense yet friendly, lubricated with excellent Franciacorta wine. It is 101 years since Ilya Mechnikov was awarded the Nobel Prize for discovering phagocytosis, and we now know that macrophages are antigen-presenting cells in addition to mopping up opsonized microbes. HIV is not cytopathic in macrophages, but it does adversely affect their various functions. Amongst all the elegant microarray data and cytokine signalling presented by others, I suggested that the wasting syndrome in AIDS is due to infection of macrophages, not CD4+ lymphocytes, by invoking Maedi-Visna disease in sheep.

**22 April.** Istituto San Raffaele, Milano. I joined two avuncular Italian scientists to conduct a viva voce examination of a student who had written a thesis (in English) on a novel method for isolating immortalized B-memory cells secreting monoclonal antibodies that neutralize H3N2 influenza virus. The student wished

The SGM President, **Robin Weiss**, reflects on a busy month, not only for himself, but for microbiologists worldwide.

to gain her doctorate before the birth of her baby, a mission satisfactorily accomplished.

**24 April.** In Rome for the formal inauguration of the European Society for Virology. Ron Desrosiers (Harvard), Ab Osterhaus (Rotterdam) and I were the speakers in the scientific session. Shortly after Ab's talk, his mobile phone rang. It was the WHO calling about the outbreak of H1N1 influenza in Mexico. Thus I gained inside knowledge 3 hours before the public announcement, and Ab had to leave hurriedly.

**27 April.** My phone rings frequently with journalists asking for comments on the new 'flu outbreak. Not being a genuine expert, I give the media the names of four SGM members who really are, and who can explain the situation authoritatively and clearly.

**30 April.** I'm clearing out old files and piles. Can I dump 3 years of SGM Council papers straight into the recycling box or should I shred them first? The first Londoner is confirmed to have Mexican 'flu. Was it just imagination, or were more people than usual coughing and sneezing on the Northern Line Underground this morning? I rationalize the situation by telling myself that it might be smart to catch the 'flu early, before it becomes more virulent, and gains resistance to Tamiflu. But then again, I'm not an expert.

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