

Science Is in a Commercial Strait-Jacket

Science has been placed “in a strait-jacket” by the profit motives of business management, according to a prominent adviser on agricultural science. Dr Doug Edmeades, Managing Director of agKnowledge Ltd in New Zealand, presents his trenchant views in the May edition of *Australasian Science* magazine, published today.

Pointing out that both Australia and New Zealand lag well behind most of the OECD countries in their proportions of GDP spent on research, Dr Edmeades writes that there have been “profound effects” as these governments “have implemented policies designed to make the limited science dollars go further and/or to supplement the government’s contribution to R&D by attracting private research dollars”.

He cites the case of AgResearch Ltd, NZ’s largest Crown-owned science organisation (now a limited liability company), which “is required to undertake public good research, pay taxes, make a profit plus return a dividend to its owner, the government. Government funding has been cut from NZ\$130 million to NZ\$75 million from 1992 to 2008, offset to some degree by private sector research. Needless to say, they are still shedding staff to meet their financial goals. To cope with ‘steady-state’ science funding, science is becoming increasingly commercialised and commoditised.

“AgResearch conducts research to develop pasture cultivars, but the same scientists are used by seed merchants to promote specific cultivars. How does the public know when they are speaking as salesmen for the company or as objective impartial scientists undertaking public good research?”

Dr Edmeades believes that management theories and accounting jargon being applied to the administration of science “is a sham for science” because “science by its nature is very different... The financial benefit of a piece of research is impossible to define in the short term... Scientists are intelligent and most, sensing the charade, feel undervalued in the current system... Surveys in NZ in 1997 and 2002 suggested a stunning level of dissatisfaction among scientists.

“Science must be open for discussion and debate,” Dr Edmeades concludes, but says: “Competition and contestability and the protection of intellectual property act counter to this essential requirement. The gabardine cloak of secrecy does not fit well on the shoulders of science. This is confounded further when the need to raise research dollars and make profits compromises the objectivity and integrity of science.”

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