
The Jeanne Manery Fisher Award Revisited

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The Jeanne Manery Fisher award has now been on the roster of recognition offered by the Canadian Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology for nearly 20 years. Its first recipient was one of the giants of modern biology/chemistry, Dorothy Crowfoot Hodgkin. The honoree was an outstanding crystallographer and a social activist. As the guest of the Society, she gave the keynote address at the annual meeting in St. Foy (Quebec City) in 1988, after being named the Jeanne Manery Fisher Lecturer.

To date, Dr. Hodgkin has been the only non-Canadian woman to be given this award and she regarded it as an honour to keep alive the memory of a female Canadian Scientist. The fact that the scientist whose name was attached to the award had striven to push aside the barriers to recognition of women and their achievements in the Canadian Society of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology seemed to add to Dr. Hodgkin's pleasure in accepting the award.

For those of you who are too young or perhaps have forgotten the history of this award, Jeanne convinced the Canadian Biochemical Society to set up an Equal Opportunities Committee (EOC), to examine ways and means to enhance the opportunities for women in the Society. The Committee sought ways to improve the recognition and participation of women in the Society's activities, including opportunities to run for executive positions instead of being relegated to benign neglect. It was hoped that with a higher profile and increased awareness would come also the likelihood of being remembered and invited to lecture at the Annual Meetings sponsored by the Society, as well as internationally. Although both the size of the EOC (5 individuals) and its budget were small, important measures were implemented

which changed the face of the Society and made it more representative of its membership. Two important recommendations adopted by the Society were: 1) The Chair of the Nominating Committee went to the individual who won the largest number of votes in elections for the Nominating Committee. 2) At least two members of the nominating Committee had to be women. If two were not elected, they would be co-opted.

These simple measures proved highly effective in bringing women into the Executive. In fact, in many of the next elections, there was no need to enforce the regulation of two women on the Nominating Committee by co-option, since at least two were elected from the slate of men and women, even when the majority of the slate were men. There were other new committees set up to help and advise graduate students — male and female alike — on fostering their careers and overcoming obstacles and just plain encouragement at time of need. Many of these are still ongoing.

The changes which have come about in society at large have had an impact on our Society as well. Turn back the clock to 1979, when two women were invited speakers out of 200 at the IUBMB Congress. Many of us recall the days when all correspondence from the then MRC was addressed only to the male gender! Without action, the women in the Society might still be in the camp of the forgotten and neglected. There is no doubt that the establishment of the EOC had a major impact on the status of women in our Society. Until the mid-seventies, after twenty years in existence, there had been but a single woman elected President of the Society, Rose Sheinin, who was President from 1975-76. After 1980, the following women served in that capacity: Rose Johnstone, 1985-1986; Catherine Lazier, 1986-1987; Yvonne

Lefevre, 1991-1992; Frances Sharom, 2000-2001.) Without conscious effort to keep a high profile in the Society, it won't take a decade before the female scientists find themselves returned to the back benches of the Society's activities at all levels.

Prior to 1980, the number of woman invited from within or outside the Society to present major papers at our meetings was negligible. Subsequent to 1980, in the last twenty years, women have more frequently been selected as major speakers, as anyone interested in the Society's record can check. The Jeanne Manery Fisher Award made certain that at least a single woman would be visible to the many young, aspiring female scientists in our discipline. We owe a debt to Jeanne for helping to make our Society more democratic, representing all its participants, not only half of the human race.

In the years since the inaugural lecture, a strange malaise has befallen a significant number of practicing female scientists in the biological/medical arena, when they are proposed as recipients to honour Jeanne Manery Fisher. They excuse themselves because they do not want to be considered for an award exclusive to women! Presumably, the argument would run that if women only are eligible, the scientific merit of the award is demeaned because the competition is reduced. Such an argument would and could logically apply to any restricted award, whatever the basis of the restriction; ethnic origin, mother tongue or even age. Indeed, one could argue that in a democratic, multi-racial society, any attempt to discriminate between citizens on any basis except merit is inconsistent with the democratic values of the society. Taken to its extreme, there should be no prize that is limited to a select group in the general community. In Canada, the Giller Prize for literature would include all writers and not just those published in English. I have heard no outcry that in a country like Canada, there should be no provincial awards, or even civic awards — except those run on a national basis. The absurdity of such regulations is immediately apparent, and it has never been shown that a potential honoree in Quebec turned down the honour because the basis

for making the award was restricted to Quebeckers!

In the particular case under discussion, the main objective is to honour the memory of Jeanne Manery Fisher. Dismayed by the evidence that women were overlooked in our scientific community, she used her determination and influence to bring about change and create a more even playing field. The second objective is to raise the profile of outstanding female scientists and recognize their achievements by the members of our discipline in Canada, thereby helping to attain a higher visibility for practising female scientists. The third objective in seeking a candidate for this award is to choose an individual who has taken a lead from Jeanne's footsteps and tries to improve, foster and elevate the participation of woman in our discipline. The up and coming — or the "arrived" — female scientists who are nominated and named as awardees of the Jeanne Manery Fisher Prize, should recognize that they bring honour to Jeanne's name and acknowledge her important contributions. The high quality of the recipients' scientific work bears witness to Jeanne's belief in fostering scientific achievement by women and to have it recognized publicly inside and outside our community. In addition, we have a commitment to her memory to foster equal opportunities for all.