

LIFELINE

Antoine Danchin



Initially a mathematician and physicist, Antoine Danchin became a geneticist by a stroke of luck. Starting books from the middle and reading

backward and forward, he decided to experiment on bacteria, with the aim of understanding how genes function collectively. He is head of a research unit at the Institut Pasteur in Paris, France, and helped to create the HKU-Pasteur Research Centre in Hong Kong.

Who was your most influential teacher, and why? Arsène

Chassang, in high school, because he made me discover Greek philosophy.

Which research paper has had most effect on your work, and why? Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* led me to explore in depth the alphabetic metaphor of the genetic program in the early 1970s, and, subsequently, in the 1980s to trigger the sequencing of the *Bacillus subtilis* genome.

What alternative therapies have you tried? Did they work? A glass of mercury—believe me, it worked.

What apart from your partner is the passion of your life? West African savannah, I feel a deep memory of the place, when we were not yet *Homo sapiens*.

Do you believe there is an afterlife? Yes, in the form of a variety of maggots, bacteria, minerals, water, and gases.

What is your favourite book, and why? Alain Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes*—it expresses most of the fundamental incommunicability between human beings.

What do you think is the greatest political danger to the medical profession? The Ego.

Where were you in your sibling order, and what did you gain or lose as a result? As first born, I gained a sense of responsibility and lost a sense of humour.

Do you believe in monogamy? Yes, because life is so short: it is impossible to discover all the riches of even a single wife. But the odds are against success in the matter—it is always too late.

Jabs & Jibes



The new policy

This morning a representative of a drug company invited me to attend a free outdoor symphony performance and fireworks display. "It's our last event before the new policy", she added. "Ah, the new policy", I nodded. She was referring to the new code of professional behaviour adopted by the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America. There would be no more lavish drug company bacchanalia, gifts, or free golfing vacations at five-star resorts given under the guise of educational symposia. Only "modest meals" would be provided in the future, and spouses would no longer be invited to the feeding frenzy either. I was intrigued by the term "modest meals". Would bologna be substituted for prime ribs? The loss of thousands of doctors eating at upscale restaurants at drug company expense could be enough to cause the next recession.

The decision of wealthy drug companies to refrain from bribing physicians and to give up other forms of obsequious pandering was taken deeply to heart by our medical staff. The local representatives of the American Medical Association felt that it was a terrible day for organised medicine. Not only were the free vacations, meals, and gifts going bye-bye, but Heaven forbid that anyone in the media should reach the conclusion that the drug companies were acting more ethically than the medical profession itself. To prevent this public relations calamity the leadership of our hospital arranged a public "giving back" ceremony complete with television coverage.

The solemn proceedings were begun by our chief of staff who was wearing an academic gown a few sizes too small. "Obviously it is impossible for us to give back all the gifts, great and small, that we have been accustomed to taking so liberally since our earliest days in medical school. Calculators, clocks, and callipers; books, bags, and blouses; and

always food, food, food", he intoned with much pious alliteration. "Freebies have blinded our better judgment. We always prescribed the newest and most expensive drugs." He shed one very small tear from each of his corpulent eyes as he turned to smile bravely for the cameras.

"Now, as we seek to re-establish our relative moral superiority, I have asked each of you to return a drug company gift for our special collection. We will donate these cherished items to the science departments of our local schools to inspire our children to follow in our path."

The ceremony continued as we formed a long line around

the hospital auditorium and slowly advanced to the collection point. Ahead of me in line were colleagues I had known for years. A cardiologist threw in his gold plated stethoscope, and his partner sadly parted with a red rubber model of the left ventricle. The ear doctor gave up his plastic semicircular canals, and the ophthalmologist sadly rolled away a model of an eye the size of a bowling ball. I waved a fond farewell to the growing mountain of drug company toys with my ghastly clear plastic hand gnarled with arthritis before I tossed it into the collection of colourful oversized pieces of human anatomy. The urologist threw away his brass testicle with a sad clink.

We made our way to the exit and we were given certificates of continuing medical education for our trouble, although I wasn't sure what lesson we had learned. A hospital administrator was there to shake hands and complete our absolution by sprinkling us with bottled mineral water donated by a drug company.

I was the last one out. After making sure I was alone, I retraced my steps and stole back my plastic hand as a memento of the good times I'd had with the old policy. I took the hand home for my kids to play with.

Larry Greenbaum

