

## Guest Editorial

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### Alfred Bernhard Nobel (1833-1896)

There is much that is exciting and controversial about Nobel prizes. They evoke accolades of wonder as well as cries of disappointment, and even protest. The eminent achievers who have won the coveted Nobel Prize and the prominent giants who did not, form a galaxy of exalted stars amongst whom the 20th century hall of fame will have to be equally divided (1). Well over 600 Nobel prizes have been awarded since 1901 when the prizes were instituted. Many a scientist dreams of this distinction, for realising which there are a few prerequisites. The work must be top class, and the worker must be alive, as the Nobel prize is never given posthumously. No scientist has ever declined the award. "I don't like the idea of such prizes", however, was the blunt reaction of Trygve Haavelmo, the 77 year old Norwegian Econometrician who was awarded the Nobel prize for economics in 1989 for the work done in 1940's! Ironically, many others who had based their work on his theories got the award earlier. The story of Nobel prizes goes back to the will of Alfred Nobel, according to which his formidable remaining realizable estate was to be utilised thus: "The capital shall be invested by my executors in safe securities and shall constitute a fund, the interest on which shall be annually distributed in the form of prizes to those who in the preceding year shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind". It was to be divided into five equal parts for work done in the fields of Physics, Chemistry, Physiology or Medicine, Literature and Peace. The prize in Physiology or Medicine was by no means the result of a sudden whim. It was the climax of Nobel's long-standing personal interest in these subjects. Nobel not only enjoyed close contact with eminent physiologists - Landsteiner, Carrel and Pavlov, to name a few - but had also closely followed their work and contributed substantially towards their projects. All three went on to eventually win the prestigious award. The problem of aging and dying was discussed at length with Pavlov and Nencki by Nobel, and considerable grants from him benefitted their laboratories.

Alfred Bernhard Nobel was born on 21 October 1833. A descendant of Scanian farmers from the southern tip of Sweden, Nobel was an abbreviated form of Nobelius, a name that had been assumed by one of his illustrious ancestors who was born in the parish of Nöbbelov. Third of the four sons of Immanuel Nobel, he was way ahead of his contemporaries, both as regards knowledge and intellect, right from an early age. Immanuel himself was an exceptional person - a natural genius full of ideas and schemes, some of them too fantastic to be realistic. Successful projects ruined by accidents and bad luck leading to bankruptcy on three occasions was the unfortunate story of his life till young Alfred progressed into a scientifically trained chemist.

When his father's financial situation was good, Alfred travelled abroad for over two years to get some more education. He spent most of this time in Paris in an obscure chemistry laboratory. Upon his return he worked along with his father till 1859 when the factory folded up owing to bankruptcy. He proceeded to work on nitroglycerine, discovered by Ascanio Sobrero, an Italian scientist, and managed to generate the first explosion in 1862. In the following year he obtained a patent on his invention, the "Nobel lighter", a percussion detonator, in Sweden. But bad luck hounded him like a

shadow. In 1864, soon after he had established a plant in Helenborg, the factory blew up. Several lives were lost, and amongst the dead was his youngest brother, Emil. His father suffered a massive stroke, probably precipitated by the shocking events, and died in 1872.

Beaten but not broken, he managed to pick up the scattered pieces of his dreams and aspirations, and set out with redoubled determination. He immersed himself in the most productive and harmless tranquiliser known: work. He travelled abroad extensively and set up several stock companies and established a factory for the production of a less dangerous kind of nitroglycerine, first in Sweden and then in Norway. In a couple of years thereafter, nitroglycerine developed into a world industry. His experiments continued despite the hectic schedule, extensive travel and mushrooming business. Then came the invention of the improved Dynamite for which he obtained a patent in 1867. More discoveries followed and there was no looking back.

Having started with just a pair of hands, Nobel went on to become a very wealthy man. His intense dislike for pretence led him to live like a recluse. Being a famous man, he was often bothered for his biography and photographs. He turned down such requests vehemently. "I am not aware", he once replied to one such request "that I deserve any notoriety and I have no taste for its buzz" (2). He never permitted his portrait to be painted, and the only one that does exist was painted after his death. Full of humility, he gives an amusing, though not wholly true, account of his public decorations. "My decorations have no explosive basis", he writes. "For my Swedish North Star I am indebted to my cook whose art appealed to an extremely aristocratic stomach. My French order I received because of my close personal acquaintance with a member of the cabinet, the Brazilian Order of the Rose because I had happened to be introduced to the Emperor, Dom Pedro, and finally as far as the famous Order of Bolivar is concerned, I received that because Max Philipp (Director of the German Dynamite Company) had seen *Niniche* and wanted to demonstrate how true to life was the way decorations were handed out in the play".

Although a wealthy man, he remained lonely, and never had a place which he could call his 'home'. Extensive travel entailed spending time in railway carriages, steamship cabins, hotels and research laboratories rather than a home. His intention of establishing a home in Sweden where he planned to spend the evening of his life was forestalled by his death in Mio Nido on 10 December 1896.

Nobel had a flair for languages. Besides his mother tongue, Swedish, he knew German, English, Russian and French. He had a keen interest in literature, which is evident from his early letters and writings. He had the gifts that go into the making of a poet: deep feelings and fertile imagination. An English clergyman who once read one of Nobel's poems said, "I should have regarded this poem as a superior product of an Englishman, but the wonder becomes hundredfold when one bears in mind that the author is a foreigner. If he can write a poem like this in English what couldn't he produce in his own language?" (2). Most of Nobel's poems were written while he was very young. His business enterprises and scientific research took him away from his love of literature. He always regarded literature as one of the sources of strength in the progress of humanity: to him, the other source was science, natural science above all, to create happiness for future generations.

Very unlike the ostentatious man that he is believed to have been, Alfred Nobel was a reclusive forbearing idealist. He was an exceptionally intelligent, dreamy, introspective person who preferred to be alone. He was a great inventor but what exactly of, besides dynamite, remains vague; that he also was a great prize donor too is well known. Few are aware of the person he was and the type of image he commonly evokes is not flattering. Renowned for his generosity, his contributions to science and other deserving endeavors have been tremendous. "As a rule", he once wrote, "I'd rather take care of the stomachs of the living than the glory of the departed in the form of monuments". His natural inclination was less towards honouring the dead to whom tributes did not matter than towards helping the living to whom it made a difference. It is therefore, with a sense of trepidation, that we pay him this tribute a hundred years after his passing away.

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#### REFERENCES

1. Rao Jr PV, Rai S. Nobel rights and wrongs. *Expression (Indian Express Sunday Magazine)* 1993; 24 Oct: 1.
2. Schuck H. Alfred Nobel. A biographical sketch. In : *Nobel the man and his prizes.* (Ed, The Nobel Foundation). Amsterdam : Elsevier, 1962 : 3-13.

## *News and Announcements*

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### **I. IJPP is Forty**

With this issue, IJPP enters the fortieth year of publication. It is proposed to publish a special commemorative issue in October 1996 to mark the occasion. Suggestions for making the issue memorable may kindly be sent to the Editors.

### **II. XXXXII Annual Conference of the Association of Physiologists and Pharmacologists of India - 1996**

The XXXXII Annual Conference of APPI will be held at Cuttack (Orissa) in December 1996. For further details, please contact: Dr (Mrs) Anupama Panda, Organizing Secretary, 42nd Annual Conference of APPI and Professor & Head, Department of Physiology, S.C.B. Medical College, Cuttack - 753 007 (Orissa).

### **Obituary**

IJPP deeply regrets the demise of Prof. John I. Hubbard on October 1, 1995. He was Professor of Neurophysiology at the University of Otago in New Zealand. He was born on the 1st day of December, 1930, graduated from the University of New Zealand in 1952 with a Bachelor degree in Medical Sciences and went on to Oxford University to obtain his Doctor of Medicine degree. He also held a Ph.D from Australian National University. He held several important positions at the John Curtin Medical School, Australia, the National Institute of Medical Research Mill Hill, London, at the University of Texas etc. during his long stint in neurosciences. He won several scholarships and prizes including the Robert Jack Prize in Physics. An active member of FAOPS, he was a member of several other professional societies and was a Fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand. He served with distinction on several commissions on contraception, education and other matters. However, it was his research on mammalian neuromuscular transmission, spinal pathways to the cerebellum and thirst mechanisms that made him most famous. He was the author of several books on these subjects. His wife Carolyn W. Burns, Professor of Zoology at the University of Otago, writes of him, "He was a wonderful, caring man as well as a fine scientist; I miss him more than words can convey." His friends and students echo her sentiments. May his soul rest in peace.

P. S. Rao