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# Meeting expectations

by Freddie Theodoulou, Science Editor



As usual, I am writing this editorial at the weekend as October's press deadline looms. I'm not saying that I'm putting off putting pen to paper, but I've mowed the lawn, done the washing and even slotted in a Pilates class. There's nothing like a tight deadline to make me write quickly. Today's urgency is

also augmented by the fact that I am due to leave at an ungodly hour on Monday for a conference and my talk still needs to be written. But that's what the plane journey is for, no? Or should I get my slides in order and worry about the editorial later?

This dilemma has set off train of conference reminiscences. You might be surprised to know that the first conference I attended was not a symposium on plant biochemistry, but in fact a Royal Society discussion meeting about mass extinctions. A fellow undergraduate had spotted the advert and suggested that it would be a good experience to go along. I recall that we dressed up quite smartly and took the coach to London, a pair of innocents arriving in high spirits at Carlton House Terrace. What followed was fascinating. We'd studied the mass extinction that marked the end of the Cretaceous period and knew there were competing theories about the cause of the "K-T Boundary" but this didn't prepare us for the fervour with which the opposing sides made their cases. The discussion sessions were a lesson in sneering sarcasm as the iridium anomaly brigade battled the excessive volcanism camp, another group parrying with theories about giant asteroids and exploding supernovae. The audience was rowdy, resembling a televised debate in the House of Lords with occasional cat-calling and booing (though no one actually shouted "rhubarb, rhubarb!"). A bold graduate student who stood up and opined that all fossils should be given Latin binomials met with a blast of derision and was physically hauled back onto his chair by his supervisor. This was all tremendously exciting to a naive observer, but it's fair to say that it left me with a rather inaccurate impression of scientific meetings.

A couple of years later found me attending my first conference as a graduate student. I was surprised, though somewhat relieved, by the apparent lack of animosity. Data were presented and discussed, posters were viewed, wine was sipped. An afternoon was spent cheerfully debating whether a particular membrane protein pumped potassium ions or protons, with no firm conclusion. It was all relatively civilized. Things spiced up in later years with what was retrospectively dubbed "The Abscisic Acid Wars" (abscisic acid being a plant hormone not normally associated with violent conflict), though the battles were generally confined to the bar and tended to be of the verbal variety. So, what to expect next week? The data I'm presenting is unpublished, but not particularly controversial; some constructive debate would be welcome but hopefully no cat-calling. Either way, better pack a bag and get an early night. See you in December. ■