

Word to Eurotox

(Jouko Tuomisto, 43th Congress of the European Societies of Toxicology, Dubrovnik, Sep. 20, 2006)

Dear Friends,

I appreciate highly and with humble mind the award given to me today. I have been more or less involved in Eurotox and one of its predecessors, European Society of Toxicology for about 25 years. Therefore it feels great to be with the family here today.

I have been asked to say a few words on how I see Eurotox and what it should do.

Before answering that question, we have to ask, what is toxicology, and what is it for. Toxicology exists to make this world safer and better place to live. If we, as toxicologists, do not have this aim, we are working in vain. It is one of the greatest tasks anyone could have.

Eurotox is basically the representative and spokesman of European toxicologists. For this it needs a high profile, because it has to deal with mighty organisations such as European Union. For this it needs a high profile, because it is competing with great organizations such as Society of Toxicology. For this purpose, I am convinced that having numerous highly competent toxicologists as individual members is essential. National toxicological societies are important, but EUROTOX can achieve a full mandate only through competent and respected members. As a society of societies it is bound to fight similar prejudices as European Union: slowness, impersonal and ineffective decision making, ineffective implementation and difficulty in taking responsible and powerful position.

How should EUROTOX serve its members?

EUROTOX should do things that are easier done on a large and solid basis than individually or nationally. A typical service function for the members of a scientific society is a representative journal available to all members linked with the membership fee. This would be beneficial both to members and to the publisher, as seen with Toxicological Sciences as membership journal of SOT.

Another issue is to promote the professional future of its members. We are witnessing an increase in unscientific and unfounded ideas in our societies. This is far greater threat both to science and to our wellbeing, than most people seem to realise. In European Union, personal misconceptions and scientifically unfounded lobbying are competing with the best available scientific information. This is seen in chemical safety, this is seen in GMOs, this is seen in real or imagined food catastrophies. Politicians at European level seem to be even more sensitive to public media than national politicians. This leads to wrong prioritisations. We sieve gnats and swallow camels, as St. Matthew wrote 1900 years ago. And you cannot fight media, you can only try to educate media. This is one of the tasks of scientific organisations.

Along with pharmacology, toxicology is highly dependent on animal experimentation. Unscientific and unfounded public information has thoroughly mislead both the

public and the administrators in Europe. This is true both as to the importance of animal experiments, and the pain and suffering. Many people today believe that animal experiments are nothing but suffering and cruelty. Nothing could be farther from truth. This is sad and highly demotivating to people who have devoted their careers to decrease suffering in the world. Without a strong leadership European toxicologists as well as rational scientific thinking will suffer, and EUROTOX should take this issue as one of its basic tasks to help its members.

Why should all this be done?

Our society has no other way forward than to base its future on science. There are many forces in today's society that try to lead the population to highly unscientific and untrue beliefs in different issues. Some of these are innocent and done in good faith such as beliefs that all natural is safe. Some are probably based on personal crises and frustrations that lead to irrational behaviours and sometimes criminal acts. The worrying aspect is that whether unscientific beliefs are based on positive or negative reasons, much of that is connected with utmost ignorance. There we have to ask: how much of this is our own fault?

We have not been too efficient in forwarding, what we know is the best knowledge. We have not been too efficient in correcting misconceptions even if their flaws are obvious to any well informed person. We have not been too good in communicating scientific knowledge in general.

It is especially important to convey true scientific facts to younger generation, those youngsters who are choosing their careers, those youngsters who want to make the world better, but in lack of solid ideas do stupid things. In the complicated flow of information of all sorts, the population will degenerate to believe medieval misconceptions, unless scientists themselves take the pain to keep the light of correct information high, and shout high and loud what they think is correct. We should not be afraid that we are sometimes fought against, sometimes bitterly. We should show courage of doing what is right. We should be men and not mice.

- *Professor Tuomisto hold the presentation above when receiving the EUROTOX Merit Award in 2006, see <http://www.eurotox.com/awards/merit%20award.htm>*