Editorials

And Now for Something Completely Different
Mark Sussman

This quintessential title phrase signifying transition seems particularly appropriate as I look at both where we have been and where we are headed in the next couple of years. Almost immediately after Roberto Bolli asked me to write a short editorial, I knew the theme had to be about changes I’ve seen at the American Heart Association over the last few years, as well as forecasting the road ahead. I suppose Roberto asked me to write this because I am the incoming Chair of the Basic Cardiovascular Sciences (BCVS) Council and am supposed to have a vision of what I want to accomplish during my tenure. Or maybe this is compensation for my last submission to Circulation Research being rejected. I’m okay with that. Really.

BCVS Scientific Sessions 2010
Mid-July is not a time when one wants to visit the California desert, where the outdoor afternoon temperatures are high enough to denature DNA. That is unless the American Heart Association holds their annual BCVS Scientific Sessions in Rancho Mirage at the luxuriously air conditioned Rancho Las Palmas Resort. The BCVS annual meeting is a recurring treat for cardiovascular researchers that never disappoints, and this year was no exception. A delightful characteristic of the BCVS conference is seeing the personalities of the organizers infused into the program, so that the content is renewed annually with fresh perspectives.

The scientific program assembled by conference cochairs Gerald Dorn and Peipei Ping was spectacular and unlike anything we have seen before at a BCVS meeting. Featuring internationally renowned faculty drawn from the proverbial 4 corners of the earth, the conference ran like clockwork at an unrelenting pace. I was struck by the convergence of cutting-edge research and scientific diversity seamlessly rolled out under the overarching theme of “Technological and Conceptual Advances in Cardiovascular Disease.” Sessions ran the gamut from molecular to cellular to whole-animal studies, with a mixture of overviews blended with reports from the front lines of current bench science. Within the opening session alone, we were welcomed with presentations on how Roger Tsien has enabled us to visualize life on a molecular level, together with how Craig Venter has synthesized life with designer DNA. The luminaries of the speaker program are too numerous to list here, but just to give you an idea of the quality, there were predictably phenomenal featured presentations by (1) Eric Olson and his take on microRNA, (2) Christine Seidman bridging the elusive bench-to-bedside gap with novel sequencing strategies, (3) James Downey with a comprehensive treatment of cardioprotection, (4) Roger Hajjar with promising results from cardiac gene therapy clinical trials, (5) Joshua Hare with exciting findings from his first-in-man mesenchymal stem cell trial, and (6) Tony Rosenzweig with a provocative look at the influence of diet on vascular repair.

There is much more riveting cardiovascular science than I have space for here, but highlights of selected presentations are on the American Heart Association BCVS 2010 website at http://www.amhrt.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=3060317. Or maybe it is easier to Google search for “BCVS sessions 2010” and click on the top link in the list. So, if this brief synopsis of the BCVS 2010 meeting has got you looking forward to next year, then by all means make plans to attend.

In 2011, we leave the scorching desert sun behind for the balmy French Quarter of New Orleans at the Ritz Carlton hotel. Coorganizers Joshua Hare and Junichi Sadoshima will undoubtedly imprint the conference with their own personalities in what promises to be another “not to be missed” event. With each BCVS conference individually unique as a Faberge egg, the best we can do to anticipate next year’s program is reflect on those immortal words: “And now for something completely different.”

BCVS 2010 to 2012: Take Control of Evolution
By the time you read this, Steve Houser will be taking his well-deserved retirement from the rigors of BCVS Chair. As we all know, Steve is a consummate leader and savvy politico who knows how to get things done. He has done a great job steering the BCVS through turbulent economic and reorganizational changes, and I’ll be leaning on him for sage counsel over the next couple of years, while I attempt to advance our agenda within the American Heart Association. Moreover, I’d like to invite all of you who participate in basic cardiovascular research at all levels of the American Heart Association to join me in energizing the BCVS. Toward that goal, here are 3 thoughts on where we can go from here with your help.

First, I am very invested in the goal of increasing participation by the next generation of basic cardiovascular scientists. These investigators, at early and midcareer levels, are the lifeblood of the American Heart Association and essential to the future health of the organization. It is depressing for me to realize that I am a “senior” scientist at age 50, but I remember back 2 decades ago, when I first got involved in the American Heart Association affiliate system. Looking back, that association helped shape my future career path in ways I
never foresaw. So, let me hear from you if you are a young scientist looking to help shape the future of the American Heart Association or if you are a fossil, such as myself, who knows of an idealistic researcher ripe for jumping into the American Heart Association organization. It’s refreshing to have those young people around who haven’t had the enthusiasm beaten out of them yet.

Second, we need to focus our efforts on where we feel parts of the American Heart Association need our help. Be it research direction, budget priorities, conference organization, advocacy, affiliate issues, membership outreach, early career outreach, international connections, partnering with other organizations, mentoring, or anything else you can think of, I want to hear from you and get you involved in whatever way you feel you can best contribute to make the BCVS a more vibrant, dynamic, and responsive group for the needs of our community. I think moving the 2011 to 2012 BCVS summer meeting to New Orleans in proximity to the French Quarter is a good start.

Third, consider how we can strengthen our ties with other groups, particularly on an international level. Progress in basic science is accelerated dramatically by successful collaboration, and we need to work together to accelerate research worldwide. For example, the BCVS summer meeting has been undeniably enriched by attendance and support from our colleagues throughout the world. In addition to the International Society for Heart Research, there’s the Japanese Circulation Society, European Society of Cardiology, and Chinese meetings including the Great Wall and Oriental Cardiology Congress, among others. Times are tough, and we should be supporting one another. If you are motivated to see connections forged between BCVS and our other basic science–oriented brethren throughout the world, then I want to hear from you and get you involved in making it happen.

On a closing note, if you are disenchanted with or disenfranchised by the American Heart Association, then here’s your chance to be heard. However, if you are unwilling or unable to help make the change happen, then don’t expect results. Anyone who knows me will tell you I am a world class complainer and consummate malcontent. I am stepping up and will call it as I see it for the next couple of years. If you want to get in the game, then let me know. Anyone can critique performance from the sidelines and have all the answers from the safety and comfort of their office chair. I challenge you to get up and get involved. Trust me, there’s plenty to do. If you don’t like the direction things are headed with me calling the shots, then hang on for a couple years, and I’ll go into the sunset like Steve Houser is doing now. I’ll sign off now by happily letting you know that Wally Koch has agreed to serve as Vice Chair of the BCVS committee. He’ll be writing his own inaugural address in 2012, and it could have your fingerprints all over it. But you have to commit to being a part of the plan right now.

Change is inevitable. Although change can be stressful, it can also present opportunities to make us more dynamic and stronger. I look forward to the challenges ahead and doing everything possible to make the BCVS a group you are proud to be a part of. Let’s do it together, and I’m happy to let you get the credit. I wanted to end this editorial with something pithy, but I’m nowhere near as eloquent or erudite as Roberto Bolli. So, I’ll leave you with a quotation from Monty Python explaining “the meaning of life” from the eponymously titled film: “Well, it’s nothing very special. Uh, try and be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in, and try and live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations.”

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