

BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL



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No Cell is an Island

SIR,—Your leading article of 13 September, p. 609, takes as its heading the title of the forthcoming Kennaway lecture which will be delivered by Dr. Paul Weiss in London on 23 October. It is most welcome at this time, for, as you say, the breakdown of old ideas about the mammalian cell as a self-contained unit is "bringing excitements almost every week in the fields of biology and cancer research." Perhaps, however, you do those of us who have been attacking some of these old ideas for many years a little less than justice when you say that "until recently the assumption that each mammalian cell has an individuality—a structural and functional sanctity of its own—has not been seriously challenged."

Paul Weiss¹ made this challenge on the functional side in 1962 in an admirable paper entitled "Cells and Their Environment Including other Cells." I did so in a purposefully forthright and controversial manner² to call attention to one aspect of these ideas under the heading "An Attack on Cyto-logism," having previously written a book around this subject in 1960.³ Another book recently published by Leslie Foulds⁴ continues and expands this theme in the cancer field.

There can be no real autonomy in the component parts of a living organism. The constitutional endowment and the environment of a cell are both vital to its performance. An organism cannot be broken down into its component parts and rebuilt step by step as a house may be. Cancer research has grown out of the narrow belief in a specific intracellular change induced by a particular carcinogen producing one cancer cell which develops a uniform autonomous tumour clone. It is now beginning to examine struc-

tural as well as functional variability and reap the reward.

All areas of biology may be approachable but not all are comprehensible at the molecular level. Macromolecular chemistry deals with a greater range of reactivity than is possible with smaller molecules, and there is more and more to be taken into account as organizational complexity increases through cells, tissues, and organs to whole organisms. At each stage new properties and potentialities appear as a result of combinations of lesser organizations. Macfarlane Burnet⁵ took a tilt at the limitations of biology at the molecular level which has a relevance here. The same considerations apply to biology at the cellular level, particularly when we are concerned with the problems of disorders of growth in tissues which are constantly undergoing controlled replacement and repair. They also apply to men in society just as they do to cells in organisms.

Your distorted quotation from John Donne is most appropriate, for indeed no cell is an island entire of itself, the death of any cell diminishes the whole, and cells too should never send to know "for whom the bell tolls."—I am, etc.,

D. W. SMITHERS.

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- 1 Weiss, P. A., in *Biological Interaction in Normal and Neoplastic Growth*, eds. M. J. Brennan and W. L. Simpson. Churchill, London, 1960, p. 3.
- 2 Smithers, D. W., *Lancet*, 1962, 1, 493.
- 3 Smithers, D. W., *A Clinical Prospect of the Cancer Problem*, 1960. Edinburgh, Livingstone.
- 4 Foulds, L., *Neoplastic Development*, Vol. 1, 1969. Academic Press, London.
- 5 Burnet, F. M., *Lancet*, 1966, 1, 37.

Origin of the Third Heart Sound

SIR,—Following your recent leading article (26 July, p. 193) and subsequent correspondence (16 August, p. 413, and 6 September, p. 597) regarding the origin of the third heart sound, we wish to report observations on patients who have had their mitral valves replaced with an inverted aortic or pulmonary homograft. During this procedure the chordae tendineae are excised together with the mitral valve.

In 11 patients we have recorded phonocardiographically a diastolic sound indistinguishable in timing and character from a third heart sound. This sound was found on repeated recordings up to seven months after operation, and was noted to be present in the absence of mitral regurgitation or overt cardiac failure. Also four of these patients have had both mitral and tricuspid homograft replacements and consequently have no atrioventricular subvalve apparatus.

We therefore feel that the presence of an intact subvalve apparatus is not always necessary for the production of a third heart sound. These findings will be reported in detail later.—We are, etc.,

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Whose Decision?

SIR,—Not all agree with your endorsement (13 September, p. 607) of Lawson's¹ views that in the case of a severely ill handicapped baby "the parents should not participate in the actual decision whether or not to imple-