

## COMMENTARY

### CSIRO'S COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES — SOCIOLOGY OF A SCIENTIFIC GIANT\*

Wendy Parsons

Over the past 12 months, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) has reviewed its performance in both internal and external communication. A committee headed by Baileu Myer brought down its report on CSIRO's external communication in May this year.<sup>1</sup> In the course of its deliberations, it had commissioned PA Management Consultants to survey key decision makers in several areas, for their perceptions of CSIRO's communication performance.<sup>2</sup> The Organisation emerged less than white. A similar picture came from a carefully designed survey of CSIRO's own staff as the basis for a review of internal communication (yet to be made public).

Both reviews are giving a clear message to CSIRO — there is room for great improvement, and the initiative must be taken by senior management, senior management being Chiefs, Institute Directors and members of Secretariats and the Executive. The CSIRO Executive has accepted, almost without change, the Myer Committee's recommendations. This means that, for the first time in its 60 years of existence, CSIRO has a stated policy on external communication. It reads:

Communication is an integral part of CSIRO's research process, both in determining research objectives and in advising the results of research. The broad objectives of CSIRO's external communication activities are to:

- (a) obtain the best possible advice from governments, industry, academic institutions and the community on research needs, opportunities and priorities as an integral part of the strategic planning process;
- (b) inform governments, industry, academic institutions and the community of the Organisation's research policies, objectives and priorities and the reasons for the decisions;
- (c) advise the national and international scientific and technical community of the results of research for inclusion in the scientific and technological knowledge base (subject to commercialisation considerations) and for peer evaluation;

\* The views expressed here are those of the author and not necessarily those of CSIRO.

- (d) actively promote the full use of current technologies and the adoption of new technologies, processes and developments by industry, governments and the community and, where appropriate, assist in their introduction; and
- (e) inform the community of research results and their implications and stimulate public debate on issues in science and technology through the media, community awareness programs and the education system.

The task now is to make that policy work. The Committee states that the major responsibility for external communication rests with CSIRO Divisions across Australia. It's interesting to put this situation — policy to be promulgated mainly by CSIRO's Divisions — into historical perspective.

Since the Organisation was formed (as CSIR in 1925), it has depended to a large extent on the public's enchantment with science to keep it buoyant in the eyes of politicians. This honeymoon came to an end about ten years ago, but CSIRO failed to see it. Over the same 60 years, CSIRO had continued to put virtually untrained staff, very often ex-scientists, into information and liaison positions in Divisions and central groups. It is small wonder, then, that the Organisation now finds itself with a largely unco-ordinated communication team scattered throughout Divisions, and central groups (including the CSIRO Science Communication Unit and Central Library, Information and Educational Services) and still working with inadequate understanding of the communication needs of Divisions.

The problem is sociological as well as historical. The communicators of the Organisation have historically been rated as a different 'social' group from the researchers whose work they are trying to communicate. To generalise, researchers have believed that communication, apart from scientific papers, is quite separate from the actual research. So, communication of research results beyond scientific papers has come to be seen by them as a luxury, and in funding matters, as competition to research. The opposite is true, of course. Research without effective communication to users is not worth the time or money put into it. That is the message of the Myer report.

The emphasis of the Myer report being on CSIRO Divisions, Chiefs and their research staff are being told (via a series of staff seminars co-ordinated from CSIRO Headquarters) that they need to get out and talk to user groups. This poses a problem for research staff who still operate in a system which rewards the production of scientific papers through promotion. Indeed, scientific papers are an important tool of communication with a small number of user groups, and they are the key to the scientific excellence of an organisation, but they do not necessarily win funding or recognition from groups outside the science

community or science-oriented user groups. Most importantly, they are not designed to reach politicians.

CSIRO management finds itself in the dilemma of having to lift its communication performance using an unco-ordinated and under-trained human and technological resource. Balieu Myer's committee has said that if CSIRO does not devote more effort to communicating with decision makers to convince them that expenditure on science and technology is an investment in future economic performance, then the Organisation may not survive into the 1990s. With CSIRO's appointment of a Director, Information and Publication imminent (as at September 1985), it will be interesting to see whether the Organisation can gather the communication strength it needs both to carry out the recommendations of the Myer report and also to meet the demands of the ASTEC Review of Public Investment in Research and Development in Australia.

## REFERENCES

1. *Review of CSIRO's External Communication Activities, Volume 1, Report of the Review Committee*, CSIRO, Canberra, May 1985.
2. *Review of CSIRO's External Communication Activities, Volume 2, Report to the Review Committee on the Community's Perceptions of CSIRO*, CSIRO, Canberra, December 1984.