

# Chernobyl – opening the pages to scientific authors from Eastern Europe

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More than 17 years after the largest nuclear accident mankind has yet seen not all biomedical observations made in the context of this disaster have been published. Furthermore all the consequences have not yet evolved, not all of them are obvious, and some might remain hidden forever. In February 2003 a symposium on the aftermath of this nuclear catastrophe, organized by PSR / IPPNW<sup>1</sup> Switzerland and the Faculty of Medicine, University of Basel was held in Basel, Switzerland. The editorial board of the Swiss Medical Weekly was approached and asked to publish the papers presented. While we were initially hesitant we finally decided that it was our obligation as a continental european medical journal to open our pages. Our initial indecision was due to the fact that several of the studies reported had important flaws in their design and the statistical methods applied to the bulk of data collected by some of the investigators often appeared inappropriate. However, we have to concede that biomedical journals are more and more disposed to reposing in self-importance whilst demanding perfectly designed studies preferably with results excluding uncertain conclusions by tiny p values and avoiding type-II errors, even where the results are clearly evident beyond a doubt using simple descriptive statistics. Compare the problem to a microscope lens not sharply focused or even giving a slightly distorted picture because of flaws in the glass – is that of real importance as long as you recognise the object im-

aged? If there is no perfect microscope at hand, do you not observe? Do you not listen to the facts reported by the scientist depending on deficient instruments?

A more personal obstacle to the support of the publication of these papers, for me as editor in chief, was the fact that the symposium was co-organized by a politically motivated organization, whose goals and intentions I do not share. I strongly believe that, at least for the time being, society will remain dependent on nuclear energy. The latest poll in Switzerland in May 2003 shows that the majority of voters support this view. Yet this does not dispense modern society from dealing with the dangers and important drawbacks of this form of energy. Even small advances in the recognition of possible consequences have to be made public and discussed.

Starting with this issue the SMW will publish a series of papers presented at the Basel Chernobyl Symposium. On page 474 of this issue, Dr. Yuri E. Dubrova, one of the world's leading experts in the field of germ line mutations, reports on one of the most alarming consequences of nuclear irradiation. On page 488 Dr. Y. I. Bandazhevsky documents the tissue burden of Cs-137 in children, the segment of the population most vulnerable to radiation. Other important papers are to follow in subsequent issues.

*Andreas Schaffner*

<sup>1</sup> Physicians for Social Responsibility / International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War

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