

Address to the Chilean Society of Physiological Sciences¹

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It is difficult for me to hold my emotions while thanking the speech given on my behalf by the President of the Chilean Society of Physiological Sciences, as well as by the gesture of the Board of Directors that nominates me as Honorary Member of the Society.

Going back in time to my first encounter with this scientific discipline, I have to acknowledge the strong intellectual influence received from the three professors who taught me Physiology at the School of Medicine. Two of them, Drs Samuel Middleton and Jaime Talesnik, have already been nominated as Honorary Members of this Society. In those early days, I also heard about Dr Bruno Günther, who at the University of Concepción was enlightening his students with a quantitative outlook of the physiological sciences. On the other hand, as soon as I began my professional life as a physiologist, I took up as models to emulate those of Dr Héctor Croxatto and of my mentor and friend Dr Joaquín Luco. All these people I mention are already honorary members of this Society. I never thought of myself as being a part of this group.

The fact that my colleagues, my peers, have honored me with this distinction not only surprises me but also moves me and fills me with pride. What else could a scientist ask for but the recognition of his peers! I ask myself why did they do it. Giving free rein to my vanity I would like to believe that it has to do with a series of papers published in the *Journal of General Physiology* and *Nature* in which, when no-

body else thought of it as a possibility, we were exploring the notion that proteins could be involved in the conduction of the nervous impulse. The last paper in that series, published in *Nature* with my student (Dr Eduardo Rojas) as first author, demonstrated that this was indeed the case. Nowadays, work is done on ion channels, proteins that span the cell membrane which are assigned the properties responsible for excitability. I would also like to think it is for having been the first one to show (*Biophysical and Biochemical Acta*, and *Journal of General Physiology*) the dynamic state of cytosolic Ca^{2+} , concept that currently covers wide aspects of cellular biology. Nevertheless, I do not think these are the reasons, but rather a special sort of chance. Somehow, a big number of intellectually well endowed persons, with a tremendous work capacity together with an infinite love for the scientific endeavor, in particular to Physiology, went through my laboratory, leaving behind a notable and permanent imprinting in the international scientific literature. They are so many that is impractical for me to name them all, because when I have tried, I have inadvertently left someone out, which has later been a problem for me. Some of them are now full Professors in prestigious universities in the Northern Hemisphere, but all of them always mention their stay at Montemar in such a way that the laboratory at Montemar has been labeled as a great and incredible heroic feat achieved by a modest country in the field of Physiology. When Montemar is associated with a per-

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son, for practical reasons no attempt is made to link it to all those involved in the accomplishment, but rather to whom began it all. That is why I have received some homage. So much for the modesty section in these acknowledgments.

Due to the rank my age gives me, let me claim the right to a certain degree of arrogance. I will proudly talk about one aspect of my personality, which is in a sense the source of all these compliments. Without this personality trait, the Montemar adventure would have been impossible. I am talking about generosity. Allow me to share with you a private homage I received, equally moving as this one. Within this last year, Mitzy Canessa², aware of her illness, made her last visit to Montemar. It was an emotionally charged reunion since she was one of the first five researchers at the Montemar laboratory. Talking about past experiences, suddenly she said: "Mario, nobody else has ever given so much to us without ever asking for something in return." True or not, the fact that a person like Mitzy—recipient of our homage the first day of this Meeting—would have stated such notion is truly moving and fills me with pride. It is for me more valuable than one hundred publications in the best journals. I have told you this, not because I am looking for further compliments, but rather to convey my personal infinite satisfaction with that notion and also to make you an invitation. This invitation, to which for most of this audience is superfluous, is to brand all your academic activities with generosity. It worries me to have witnessed that sometimes when a senior investigator loans equipment to a younger investigator or one of lesser academic rank, he or she feels entitled to decide what is done in the laboratory. Or, that through a casual conversation with a colleague, he or she later feels upset because is not placed as an author in the published work related to that conversation.

At the beginnings of Montemar laboratory, we were five investigators. Each one carrying out one research theme; it was its personal problem. The technical difficulties were everyone's. Because we shared the

living quarters of a house, all technical aspects of the projects were discussed at dinner time, without no one ever thinking that because of that, one would become author in the resulting publication. It was enough to receive an acknowledgment. This way of thinking becomes evident in the following odd fact: our first two doctoral students—Cecilia Hidalgo and Ramón Latorre—published three papers (two in the *Journal of Physiology* and one in *Nature*) without their tutors being co-authors. Noble gesture to stimulate the young generation! Not to mention the usage of the equipment. They were shared property, without worrying about who had provided the funding to buy them. Furthermore, guests to the laboratory who occasionally used our equipment could use it as a right and not just as a favor, because Science is a noble endeavor. It was our task to make them feel that way.

Having said so, I would like to further you an invitation, to enjoy what you are doing. I make this suggestion because I feel that in many of us there is a concern about improvements in the size of our *Curricula vitarum*, rather than enjoying the way our research is going or a good discussion with our students. It seems like FONDECYT and our universities, in their pursue of better academic performance, have generated such a level of pressure, that forces us to keep the accounting of every conference given, each thesis reviewed, how many students we have or how many publications we get. Nobody ever asks for the quality and deepness or relevance of our work. There is no doubt in my mind that a contribution—not merely descriptive but rather truly trying to understand up to the molecular level all the alternatives of a physiological process, even though it takes years—is more valuable than a thousand routinely "turnings of the crank", which do supply useful information and thus are publishable in indexed journals, but that are devoid of creativity, besides the few new findings per year which may be gathered without too much effort. The most outstanding feature of our work is its beauty. I invite you to fight against those pressures that will introduce a false set of values into our work.

² Deceased February 1st, 1997.

Just a few days ago, I received an e-mail note from Dr Fernando Vargas, another of the first five researchers at Montemar. Currently he is retired, although still at work at the Physiology Department at the University of California at Davis. In the note, he mentioned that his colleagues were surprised to learn that he still did experiments by himself and was publishing. "Pity them—he said—, they don't know that one works because one likes to do it".

So, let's make our lives blissful lives. Without neglecting too much our families, without forgetting that we belong to a soci-

ety that gives us and asks from us, let's enjoy our craft with intensity and passion.

I thank you for your attention.

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