

"Too many
conferences"

June 6, 1956

Dr. Thomas M. Rivers
National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis
120 Broadway
New York 5, N.Y.

Dear Dr. Rivers:

Thank you for your very cordial letter of June 5. Mr. O'Connor has made a gracious gesture whose intentions my colleagues and I are bound to appreciate very much. Let me add that I was personally very grateful to be able to participate in the meeting earlier this year which reviewed Dr. Sabin's material.

During the past few years, however, I have been nurturing a growing conviction that general scientific meetings have proliferated beyond the point of maximum usefulness. During this year, for example, there will have been at least five different meetings at which the genetic functions of nucleic acids comprise a major topic. It is difficult for a scientist to refuse an invitation to attend such a meeting. Apart from considerations of prestige (and we have to admit that even scientists are not immune to them), one hates to offend the offerer, particular when the tender is in such a cordial spirit, and there is always the temptation of revisiting old friends, perhaps even the chance to make new ones and learn new facts. In reviewing my correspondence of the last year I find, however, that despite having refused more than half the requests that I had received, the trips I did make resulted in a serious discontinuity in my work in the laboratory. I would be hard put to say that any one of these trips was not worth the time, but in the aggregate they have made me less of a scientist if, somewhat dubiously, more of an orator.

On the whole, I would suggest that Mr. O'Connor's gift might constitute an even more pointed gift to science if they could help find a solution to this problem, to help scientists ward off temptation, and help them stay in their laboratories for more work and less talk. I would have made a conspicuous exception for the Sabin meeting, as it was more in the character of a consultation on a specific problem. Nor do I mean to choke off scientific meetings altogether. I do feel that there are too many of them in the aggregate, no matter how high their individual merits. As an alternative, I would suggest the utility of a source of travel funds which individual scientists could use for personal consultations with one another on specific problems.

This is a large answer to a small question, Dr. Rivers, but before I give a definite reply to your invitation I would be grateful for the benefit of your comments.

Yours sincerely,

Joshua Lederberg

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