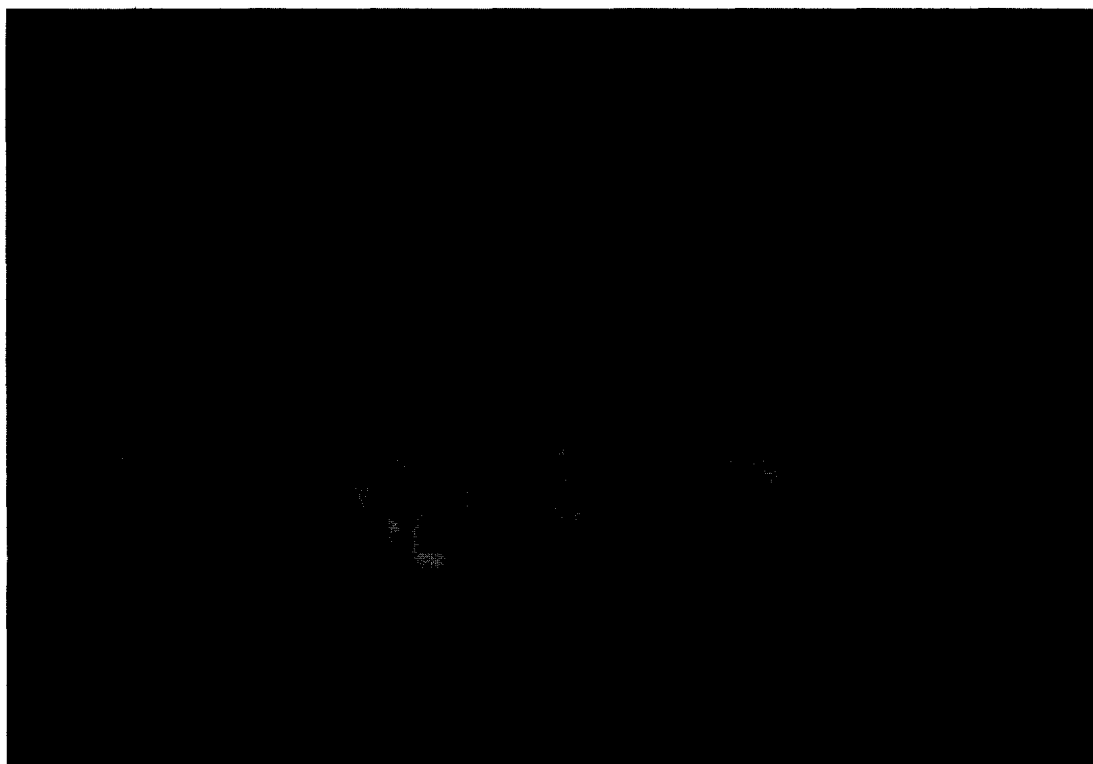


News and Views

Carrying the stick



An international symposium on Marine and Microbial Polysaccharides was held in Trondheim, Norway from 7–8 November 1996. It was a tribute to Professor Olav Smidsrød on his 60th birthday. The organising committee, Bjørn Christiansen, Kurt Draget, Bjørn Torger Stokke, Gudmund Skjåk-Bræk, Kjell Vårum from the Norwegian Biopolymer Laboratory and Oyvind Skaugrud from the Pronova company kept the meeting a secret from Professor Smidsrød for several months. The 110 participants were treated to a series of lectures from invited speakers that combined some history with current scientific developments.

Two aspects of the scientific programme made a particular impression on me. Sergio Paoletti made a powerful contribution to the debate on the carrageenan helix. Ted Atkins had emphasized earlier that the x-ray data on which the coaxial double helical model was based was not definitive. Sergio baked up strong thermodynamic arguments with the results of an nmr study to a resolution of 0.2 Å which supported a single rather than a double helical model. The other area can inevitably be considered under the heading of biotechnology. Paul Sandford updated the meeting on the progress of the islet cell transplantation programme. Currently cells are obtained from the human pancreas by a process where the other tissues are degraded and then encapsulated using alginate/poly-L-lysine and transferred into diabetic patients. By using high guluronate alginates the problem of rejection is largely overcome and as a result of the work at Trondheim it is possible to produce capsules of the required physical properties. Transplantation of the encapsulated cells into the human host is surgically straightforward and can be carried out under a local anaesthetic. Successful trials have now been conducted with a number of patients, and the rate determining step is obtaining islet cells in sufficient quantity. The use of porcine pancreases and tissue growth procedures are under investigation. Paul also raised the exciting possibility that the procedure could be used to transplant other cells, e.g. liver. Continuing the biotechnological theme Gudmund Skjåk-Bræk, a key figure in the encapsulation story, explained the progress that had been made in understanding the enzyme system which is responsible for epimerising mannuronate to guluronate during biosynthesis. An understanding that could lead to the production of alginates of any composition from bacteria.

It would not be right to end this without mentioning the conference dinner. This was held after the formal close of the meeting on the Friday evening, partly so that Professor Smidsrød's birthday, which was on the Saturday, could be appropriately greeted as midnight passed. The evening was hosted by Professor Ted Atkins who showed that he could have a second career as a toast master without any difficulty. He invited a number of those present to talk about their contact and friendships with Professor Smidsrød. It would be impossible to mention all of these. One which stuck in my mind was that from Mette Ottøy who had recently completed a PhD partly under Professor Smidsrød's direction. She gave some insight into what a stimulating supervisor of research students he is. The relationship between a student and an exceedingly busy leader of a very large research group can be a difficult one, but clearly in this case it had worked well.

At the end Olav Smidsrød, in a voice touched with emotion, (I remember his wife Kari getting up from their table to stand beside him at the microphone) spoke of his conversation with Arne Haug, the previous research leader of the research group, a week before the latter's premature death in 1975. Haug said to Smidsrød "Now you must take the stick from me and carry it". Olav Smidsrød has carried that stick a long way and will take it further yet.

John Mitchell