LETTERS TO THE EDITOR RELATIVE TO RECOGNITION
OF AN I.A.M.S. SECTION ON TAXONOMY OF VIRUSES

Comment on Virus Taxonomy Proposals

Comment has been called for on the proposals that (i) the Virus Subcommittee of the Bacteriological Nomenclature Committee be disbanded, and (ii) a new section of I.A.M.S. be formed to deal with the taxonomic and nomenclatural problems of the viruses. The following comments represent my personal views on these proposals, and are not official comment made in my capacity as Chairman of the Bacteriological Nomenclature Committee. At a later date I shall summarise the views sent to me by members of the Nomenclature Committee.

The proposals show that the virologists are following a course similar to that chosen by the bacteriologists, who, in 1930, formed a Nomenclature Committee for Bacteria that was independent of the Nomenclature Committee of the botanists. The bacteriologists formed their new Committee at the first International Congress of Microbiologists and then notified the botanists at the Botanical Congress that took place after the microbiology congress; the virologists have not yet formed their separate committee, but have asked that they may do so.

Virus taxonomy (which covers both classification and nomenclature) was considered by the bacteriologists at the 1949 Microbiology Congress, when a request for the appointment of a Committee on Animal Virus Nomenclature was said to be "outside the competence of the Committee on Bacteriological Nomenclature" (Congress Proceedings, p. 830). When the Bacteriological Code was approved in 1947 there was but scant mention of viruses (Chapter 1, General Considerations 1).

The question of virus nomenclature came before the Bacteriological Nomenclature Committee again in 1950 and, as a result, the Virus Subcommittee was set up. In my view this Subcommittee put the priorities out of order and spent too much time discussing nomenclature when its energies should have been directed to classification. In spite of much hard work by its Chairman, C.H. Andrewes, the use of a Linnaean type of nomenclature has not proved acceptable to the members. In the last few years a new approach has been

made to the characterisation (in terms of nucleic acids) and classification of viruses, and it has become obvious that viruses are not just small bacteria; they are characterised and classified in quite different ways, and a modern scheme of virus classification has as much in common with chemistry as with a biological science.

We cannot force the virologists to accept our ideas on classification or nomenclature, and it seems to me that it will be much better for them to work independently. I have always advocated that classification and nomenclature should be kept apart and that a classification should be made before nomenclature is considered. Because so many workers, including the virologists, fail to follow this precept, the problems and prejudices of nomenclature often add confusion to new approaches to classification.

For this reason I welcome the move made by the virologists to set up their own organisation to consider the problems of virus classification; this will have precedence and only at a later stage will nomenclatural problems be dealt with. I can assure them that bacteriologists will be willing to help in any conceivable way when they approach problems on the borderlines between the viruses and the bacteria.

Consequently, I support the application of the virologists to the Executive Committee of I.A.M.S. that a new section of virus taxonomy be set up. When this is agreed it will be necessary for the Bacteriological Committee to disband its Virus Subcommittee, just as the botanists fairly recently disbanded their bacteriological subcommittee.

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