Introduction

L.H.

Smaje

President- 1992 17th European Conference

Scientists rarely work within a historical context and historians of science are not necessarily aware of all the subtleties of their subject matter. It seemed appropriate therefore, to bring together scientists and historians interested in aspects of microcirculation, in an attempt to enrich the experience of both groups.

The papers that form this collection were presented as a satellite symposium of the 17th European Conference on Microcirculation held in London on July 4, 1992. They concentrate on the history of the microcirculation in the 20th century, although it was necessary to visit earlier periods in order to trace the origins of important concepts such as osmotic pressure and to consider the changing meaning of terms such as 'capillary'. In a single day only fragments of the rich diversity of work in this field could be examined, so the collection is necessarily incomplete, maybe idiosyncratic at times. However, it covers the key people whose ideas have shaped the discipline over the last 200 years and from time to time we catch a glimpse of the person behind the idea. (Early in this century Europe led the way, particularly via the 'Other Bloomsbury Set' - Bayliss and Starling at University College, Thomas Lewis at University College Hospital and Dale at the Wellcome Physiological Research Laboratories. Krogh is remembered by his daughter and then the scene shifts to the USA where papers by leading modern exponents such as Ren-kin and Zweifach remind us that the history of discovery continues).

Sometimes simple messages are the most potent. For me, one of the most telling things to emerge from the day's talks was the demonstration, across several papers, of how meaning changes over time, and how important it is to acknowledge this. A word as basic as 'capillary' for example, has had many meanings – to be aware of this is important not only in re-reading and interpreting the work of past scientists, but also in working with colleagues in related disciplines today – with the engineer who describes the mechanical properties of capillaries, the physiologist interested in exchange functions, or the anatomist defining structure. Each 'sees' the capillary differently, although each may use the same words. History provides the vital reminder.

This symposium was unique in the history of the European Society for Microcirculation. It attracted a large and enthusiastic audience which judged the experiment a success. A wider readership can now judge for themselves. Hopefully the experiment will be refined and repeated at other conferences. My thanks go to those who participated in the symposium and contributed their manuscripts for this collection. I am grateful for the support of many colleagues, and would like to make special mention of members of the Academic Unit of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine who helped to structure and support the symposium – in particular to Professor William Bynum and Dr Tilly Tansey. Special thanks go to my wife Joan for her unstinting support during both this and the main conference.

© 1994 S.Karger AG, Basel