

The “First Woman” Syndrome

BY KARIN HOLLRICHER



A couple of weeks ago I was invited by a science foundation to join a review panel. During the after work dinner, several experiences were shared showing that female scientists still suffer from sexual discrimination. Stories were told, telephone numbers were exchanged and I started research.

From time to time, the ‘gender in science’ issue hits me out of the blue. Once in a blue moon I duck quickly, hoping that another – male – colleague will pick up the story because I have written about this problem so often. Sometimes I feel like a token female journalist, forever destined to deal with all those tricky women’s issues that male writers ignore. Usually, though, I accept my lot gracefully and then begin to research and write.

My article about the women that I met at the science foundation is not yet finished. But during my research I came across some news that prompted me to write this editorial about what I call “first woman syndrome”.

At the beginning of May, the \$500,000 Albany Medical Prize in Medicine and Biomedical Research was awarded jointly to Elizabeth Blackburn of the University of California, San Francisco, and Joan Steitz of Yale University. It was the first time that any woman, not to mention two of them, were awarded the prize. Headlines beginning “First women won ...” inevitably followed. Is it really so important that they are the first women to win this award? Excellent scientists win awards irrespective of their sex, don’t they?

“First women” are making headlines now that they are allowed to enter spheres previously reserved for men. Granted, when the first woman was allowed access to a university and when the first woman stood for election, the news was worth reporting. But these events took place a fairly long time ago. Today, while we live in a time of supposed gender equality, press officers and journalists obviously still think that the fact that a woman is doing this or that for the first time is important information.

Another modern “first woman” that caught my eye last month was Marjolein Kriek. According to a press release from Leiden University Medical Centre (Netherlands) a research team has sequenced her genome – the first ever of a woman..

The sequence of Kriek’s genome has not yet been published. In the good old days, scientists first published their work and then wrote a press release. Today, press offices hold their fire only when scientific journals demand it. Leiden University took the opportunity to grab the headlines and was very successful in doing so. Hundreds of newspapers, broadcasting stations and websites introduced Marjolein Kriek as a 34-year-old red-haired clinical geneticist. Did anybody ever mention the colour of Watson’s or Venter’s hair, I wonder? Of course not. The hair colour of men in their prime isn’t usually worth reporting.

However, before digressing into the sexual politics of hair colour, back to my question why is a woman’s genome sequence

so interesting, more so than that of another African or business-person? Gert-Jan van Ommen, leader of the LUMC team said that he wanted to, “balance the genders a bit.” Well done! Van Ommen continued that it was okay to do a “Kriek” after a “Watson” had already been done. We applaud him. The new Watson-Kriek pair is a daft play on words, which nevertheless assures the attention of news writers.

While van Ommen was writing his press release, two other researchers announced the genome sequencing of a further two females during a meeting at Cold Spring Harbour. I wonder why female humans have not been sequenced during the past seven years. Of course I admit, there is a scientific reason for sequencing men’s genomes: they include Y chromosomes. Thus, say scientists, they offer more information.

However, the genomes of women are also scientifically interesting. We could learn more about the causes of gene silencing, X-chromosome inactivation and variability of the X-chromosome sequence. Also, there might be the possibility of discovering the causes of women’s diseases such as breast cancer or the triggers of the many autoimmune diseases from which women predominantly suffer. Perhaps we could even identify biological factors that account for the differences between males and females – besides sex hormones.

Anyway, female genomes have been run through DNA sequencing machines several times already. In 2002, the mouse genome was published. The sequence originated from a female animal. Three years later, a dog’s genome was sequenced – it was a female boxer. In 2007, the genome of Twilight, a female horse, was published. Last year, we also saw the sequence of another female mammal – that of Cinnamon, an Abyssinian cat. Not a single article, TV report or Website made a fuss about the animals’ sex. Not even the authors of the publication mentioned sex.

In the article about the cat’s genome the word “female” is mentioned only once.

You see, many females’ genomes *have* been sequenced – Marjolein’s sequence is just one more. So why did she provoke so many headlines? Simply by being another “first woman”! I look forward to the day when the fact that it’s a woman who won whatever prize is no longer “news”.

Having talked so much about first women I do not want to neglect “first men”. Are there any? A quick Google search revealed two: in 2006, Michael Gooch became the first man to earn a Vanderbilt University School of Nursing’s Founder’s Medal. In the same year, for the first time, an international award for au pairs has been won by a man, Alex Darziu. Congratulations!

By the way, this is the first *Lab Times* editorial ever written by a woman. Now I invite my colleagues to pop the champagne corks for this “first woman”.

