



Obituary Note

In the Spirit of John Bockris

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Abstract

The life of Prof. John Bockris provides a reminder of how good science should be undertaken and the harm a scientist and all of science suffer when these expectations are ignored.

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The spirit of Bernhardt Patrick John ÓMara Bockris left this world on July 7, 2013 after spending 90 years teaching us all how to be creative, mainly in electrochemistry, but most recently in cold fusion. He, along with Martin Fleischmann, provided our modern understanding of electrochemistry, for which he was rewarded with fame and admiration. If he had done nothing else, he would be remembered as an effective teacher, a good friend, and an example of the highest achievement in science.

But John went further by having the courage to study what is known as cold fusion. Thanks to his knowledge of electrochemistry and his friendship with Martin Fleischmann, who along with Stanley Pons [1], discovered the phenomenon, he was one of the first scientists to replicate the claim [2,3]. Normally, such success would have been considered a great achievement. Instead, certain professors at the University of Texas where he taught questioned his motives, honesty, and competence. This attack resulted in he and his wife being rejected by “friends”, an effort was made to strip him of his honor as Distinguished Professor, and the resulting legal problems required the services of a lawyer. The financial and emotional consequences took a toll on him and his family.

Meanwhile, Martin Fleischmann and Stanley Pons were experiencing similar irrational personal attack, requiring Martin to return to England and Stan to immigrate permanently to France with his family, where they were not subjected to such harsh treatment. While these three famous people provide examples of the most egregious irrational response to the discovery, almost every one who dared to study or advocate for the idea suffered. In addition to personal attack, certain powerful scientists created a myth by claiming the conclusions were not real, were an example of bad science, and were not worth the attention of anyone who valued their scientific career.

Over the next 25 years, the subject was largely hidden from the general public and conventional science. Major journals refused publication of papers, professors refused to encourage student interest, and financial support was denied by the effective policy of the DOE. Nevertheless, information about the unusual behavior accumulated until

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now the phenomenon has been proven real by overwhelming evidence. The skeptics and the small-minded attackers were proven wrong. Profs. Fleischmann and Pons have been vindicated. Only self-imposed ignorance now stops conventional science from accepting this fact.

You might wonder what this sorry tale has to do with John's life and death. John's life was devoted to teaching science at the highest level of competence and integrity. When he experienced the hostile treatment allowed by his university and the rejection by people he considered friends, he was naturally surprised, disappointed, and finally became angry. He spoke out in a paper describing the experience [4]. While his death stopped his ability to teach the proper way to have a scientific discussion, we the living have the responsibility to do the job. We all suffer the occasional consequence of ignorant and small minded behavior, but when a famous person of high standards and obvious competence, such as Profs. Bockris, Fleischmann, and Pons, are treated this way by the scientific society in general, a serious re-examination of scientific standards is required. Apparently, this process has to be undertaken in every field of science by every generation because the arrogance of the human mind is never cured, self-interest always trumps truth, and being smart does not make a person rational. Nevertheless, we all need to be reminded that new ideas must be considered with humility, objectivity, and knowledge, especially in the field of cold fusion itself.

Some new ideas are clearly wrong and need to be identified and improved. How this needs to be done is well understood in science. It does not and must not involve personal attack. Every kid who dreams of being a scientist knows this, so why is something so basic forgotten by some working scientists. Ideas must be evaluated by logic and knowledge. The rest of us need to keep reminding those scientists who forget how they are supposed to behave, as John would have wanted.

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