



Three Q's

University College London epidemiologist **Michael Marmot**, 61, whose landmark “Whitehall studies” of British civil servants showed that status and income strongly influence health, chairs the World Health Organization’s Commission on Social Determinants of Health set up last year. Its report is due in 2008.

Q: Why a new commission? Isn't the link between social conditions and health well known?

It is, but we want to offer a concrete set of evidence-based tools for governments and international bodies that want to do something about health inequalities. A number of things have come together recently: There is more evidence, some countries have started to apply it, and the international health and development communities are interested in how this type of evidence can help.

Q: Why did you take this assignment?

I have been studying the social determinants of health all my life. I saw an opportunity to put the research into practice and change things for the better.

Q: A background paper for your commission criticized the market reforms advocated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in the 1980s and '90s and warned that industry might resist your recommendations. Do you worry about being seen as left wing? We're concerned for the health of the disadvantaged. If that seems to be a left-wing position, then so be it.

AWARDS

YOUNGER CROP. The Lemelson Foundation wants its prizewinners to have a little less gray hair. In June, the Oregon-based foundation announced that it is restricting its annual \$500,000 Lemelson-MIT Prize to inventors 45 years old or younger. The average age of the 13 past winners is 61.

The move fits with the foundation’s overall goal of inspiring young people to become inventors, says Merton Flemings of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who directs the program. “We want to present inventors as role models for kids, like rock stars,” he says.

The foundation has also converted its \$100,000 lifetime achievement award into a prize to recognize inventors whose ideas can become “sustainable solutions to real-world problems,” such as improving crop yields or energy efficiency. Nominations for next year’s award are due 6 October (web.mit.edu/invent).

DEATHS

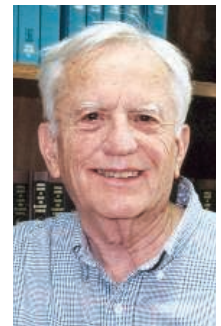
HARMONY AND DISCORD. National Medal of Science winner George Wetherill, who died 19 July at age 80, helped unify the planetary sciences in work that got him excommunicated from his church.

As a newly minted Ph.D. in physics, Wetherill joined the Carnegie Institution’s

Department of Terrestrial Magnetism (DTM) in 1953, where he and colleagues soon worked out techniques to date rocks using the slow radioactive decay of various elements. Wetherill took on the so-called uranium-lead technique that had been giving researchers fits. “George was the guy who figured out how to interpret other people’s data,” says astrophysicist Alan Boss of DTM. “When they plotted the data the way George said to, it made sense.” Wetherill called his way of graphing them a “concordia plot.”

Wetherill’s insight let researchers date rocks back to the formation of the solar system. But, as

Wetherill often recorded, his work did not sit well with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, an officially creationist church with a long history of using the word “concordia.” Wetherill, a Lutheran at the time, was thrown out of the denomination, which Boss says made him “quite proud. ... He chose very important questions and tackled them single-mindedly.”

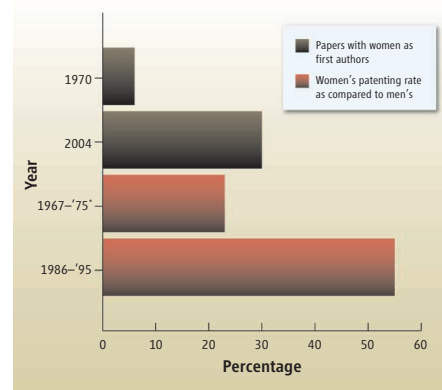


Data Point >>

NETWORK, NETWORK. Two new studies show that women in the life sciences are doing a lot better at publishing and patenting than they did 3 decades ago. But they still trail men on both measures of professional success.

In the patenting study (p. 665), researchers led by Waverly Ding of the University of California, Berkeley, found that women who earned Ph.D.s between 1986 and 1995 received patents at 55% of the rate of men in the same cohort, compared with a rate of only 23% for women who earned their doctorates between 1967 and 1975. The publishing study, by Reshma Jaggi of Harvard Medical School in Boston in the 20 July *New England Journal of Medicine*, found that the number of women lead authors in six major medical journals has risen fivefold in 30 years. But even that 30% rate falls far short of their majority status among medical students.

The gap in patenting—especially among senior women—may be the result of “limited commercial networks” and “traditional views of academic careers,” Ding speculates. Jaggi suggests that family responsibilities could be a significant factor behind the women’s lower rate of first-authorship. Mentoring programs and better work-family policies could help on both fronts, says Jong-on Hahm, former director of the National Academies’ Committee on Women in Science and Engineering.



* Cohort that earned Ph.D.s in this period.