Peter Doherty: Role Model and Lifelong Friend

Barry T. Rouse

I FIRST MET PETER in the early 1970s. I knew of him mainly because he, like me, was a veterinarian who did research and published in international nonveterinary journals. Upon meeting him, which initially occurred when he passed through Saskatoon, Canada, where I had my laboratory in the early 1970s, it was soon apparent that neither of us were cut out to practice our intended craft of fixing diseased creatures. Instead, we were interested in viruses and figuring out how they interacted with their host. Nevertheless, both of us began our research careers working with real animals (i.e., those you eat or become fond of), but soon slipped to working with rodents. Over the years, I met Peter frequently, our families became and remain lifelong friends and I also got to know many, perhaps most, of Peter's trainees. These included some quite amazing characters such as Ralph Tripp and more sane folk such as Woody, Jack Bennink, Rhonda Cardin, Steve Turner, Mark Sangster, and many more. From the earliest years, Peter has been a role model for me. I always envied his common sense understanding of science and his ability to ask penetrating questions often criticizing people and their ideas without them realizing it. On the contrary, I always succeeded in insulting people even when I was trying to be nice!

In the 1970s, I got to listen to many of Peter's talks and review some of his grants. Unlike the lucid Peter of today, his scientific stories were not the easiest to follow and his experimentation could be beyond the pale complex. Peter departed the Wistar where he spent several years solidifying his reputation as a viral immunologist and returned to Canberra to head up the Australian National University Department of Pathology. I joined him there for a mini-sabbatical in 1986. It was obvious that Peter enjoyed bench science but almost despised administration and other administrators (such as Bede Morris, also a veterinarian). He wanted to leave Canberra ("best part was the road out to Sydney") and return to the United States. I worked along with Peter dutifully counting cells in Cerebrospinal fluid samples he collected from lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus infected mice. I measured a few things and we wrote our only article together. It was not a citation classic! My biggest achievement while in Canberra was to encourage Peter to return to the United States, which eventually, after much agonizing, became lucky Tennessee—my own adopted state. Alas, he chose to locate at the intellectual end of Tennessee—St. Jude in Memphis, whereas I resided in the

beauty zone of mountains and pretty people such as the likes of Dolly Parton. While Peter was in Memphis, I used to visit and stay with him and his wife Penny each year and Peter came often to Knoxville since I had conned him to become an external advisor to our veterinary college. The trips to Memphis always had highlights. One was a visit to astonishing exhibits such as Ramses 11 and Catherine the Great for which Memphis was at that time famous. Another was escaping Peter's house early in the morning to play golf without tripping his extensive and complicated alarm system. The greatest treat, however, was going to a decent restaurant, which Peter vowed he would never return to. Thus, I usually made a scene that Peter felt excluded him from any future visits!

After a time, Peter had a habit of being nervous in October each year. In 1996, I called to inform him that I had heard from reliable sources ferreted out by our friend Hermann Wagner that there would be no Nobel this year for Peter and Rolf Zinkernagel as another topic was more deserving. How wrong we were with them receiving the prize that year and Peter reminding me about unreliable sources of data. The prize was especially pleasing to those of us with a veterinary degree since Peter was the first and remains still the only recipient of the accolade. As a consequence, countless veterinary schools around the world wanted Peter to accept honorary degrees and Peter was exposed one again to his roots. Somehow, we at the College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Tennessee never honored him in part because he wanted an Honorary DVM degree and we had no such degree to offer.

I took one exciting trip with Peter and Rolf soon after their Nobel award and this made me realize what rock stars have to deal with. One of my own trainees, Marek Niemialtowski, had returned to Poland and had become president of their immunology society. He desperately wanted to impress his colleagues by getting the pair to visit and be paraded around the medical research and political establishments. Surprisingly, they agreed to the trip, and we and their wives had a busy time meeting the Polish president and prime ministers, medical school deans as well as their participating in ancient, colorful, and elaborate special degree ceremonies. We also dined in some very fine establishments. Peter was always the main spokesman fielding creative answers to often inane questions. A highlight was Cracow and

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its interesting environs that included Auschwitz, some castles and museums as well as the impressive salt mines that we visited after Rolf departed (he had had enough!).

In recent years, most of my interactions with Peter have, alas, been infrequent and at a distance. He left St. Jude after a splendid farewell party that many of his colleagues and all his trainees attended. These included Mike Bevan, Jonathon Sprent, Rob Webster, and several others. Peter got the worship treatment from Marlo Thomas stimulating Bevan to ask “how does Peter tolerate this stuff.” Peter’s later comment was you have seen Marlo just being Marlo so diffusing any embarrassment.

My last extended time with Peter was when my wife and I stayed at Peter’s home a year or so back during the world immunology meeting in Melbourne. We had a great time, but could not help feeling just a little sorry for Peter. He was constantly being interviewed by the press and run down by young and sometimes not so young conference attendees insisting on taking selfies with him. We usually left early since Peter wanted a change of scene and a mellow scotch! Being a rock star can get old after a time and as he always

emphasized real rock stars get better rewarded for the attention they get!

Peter has now become an entertaining and well-informed writer about scientific issues and I have enjoyed reading all of his books. I understand he also took a stab at fiction, but his publisher was not impressed. Apparently Peter’s life experiences included insufficient evil and intrigue to tell racy stories! Thus, as we all know Peter is just a great guy.

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