Foreword

Perhaps this symposium only really began when the formal proceedings were over and an effort has been made to publish the main contributions as rapidly as possible so that those who were unable to attend the meeting can take part in the continuing discussions. The field of this symposium has relatively few boundaries: the title indicates that it is not always certain what is the nature of whatever persists. In some of the conditions discussed it is not known if the agents do in fact persist in the host. While the properties of some of the persistent agents, eg, those of lymphocytic choriomeningitis, cytomegalovirus disease, varicella/zoster, and subacute sclerosing pan-encephalitis are true viruses in that they have a nucleic acid core enclosed in a protein or protein lipid coat, others, such as the scrapie agent, may not contain nucleic acid and this could be true of kuru and other members of that group. It is easy to visualize an animal virus consisting only of nucleic acid and no coat (like the incomplete potato spindle virus) but difficult to comprehend the bionomics of a coat with no one inside it; and it is perhaps premature to speculate on the possible mechanism of self replication of proteins before one is certain that there may not be just a little nucleic acid—and these agents may be viruses. The reader will be able to draw his own conclusions which could be as valid as any of those taking part in the symposium. Perhaps he will finish up with Lwoff's conclusion that 'viruses should be considered as viruses because viruses are viruses'. In any event the properties of the persistent 'true' viruses and other agents are discussed by world experts on each of them in this collection of papers.

This symposium succeeded in breaking down interdisciplinary research, particularly among those interested in medical and veterinary problems. The study of Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease and the claims to have transmitted amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (recently confirmed in the USSR) may indicate lines of progress toward solving the commonest disease of the central nervous system causing crippling in adults—multiple sclerosis: the rapid advances being made with the animal leukaemias may point a way to elucidate the human problem, and so one could continue speculating on the progress which will be made from an understanding of the known persistent agents of man and animals—will work with EB virus unravel much of the aetiology of human cancer?

The College wishes to thank all speakers who took part in the symposium, and the College secretariat who organized what must be considered a successful symposium in difficult circumstances. It is regretted that it has not been possible to publish more than a few contributions to the discussion.

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