

Claude Sébenne

# More Awards in Europe Please

In a recent issue of the French Physical Society bulletin (July 1997, number 110), I made a brief analysis of the award and medal situation in physics research as it is presently in France. I had first to evaluate, at least roughly, the population involved – it is not that easy because the borders between physics and neighbouring sciences are never distinct. Moreover, many people of the industrial world do not identify themselves as physicists in spite of the nature of their work. With a wide margin of error, I reached a figure of 16,000 potential candidates in the country.

Then I counted the number of relevant awards and medals awarded by various bodies such as the Academy of Sciences, the French Physical Society (SFP), the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and so on. I reached a figure of 40 per year, ranging from a few prestigious prizes to young-physicist medals. Then, estimating that each physicist works for 40 years, the number of new candidates each year is 400 people.

In this way one can estimate that one research physicist in every 12 working in France will be brought to the attention of the national community in physics during his or her career. This is less than the 10 per cent which would be the rough result of the figures above; this reduction comes from some bright people who get two or more awards each along their career and from some young awardees who do not become professionals in the field.

Is this proportion too large? Is it comparable to other countries? My own feeling is that the progress in our science, as in any other, is made up of both work and communication. Any advance is useless if it stays unknown, so any way of ensuring the diffusion of a significant breakthrough is welcome, including shining light on its author(s). And it is less important to have made an award for a slightly lower level advance than to miss a high level one; it is

worth the risk of rewarding moderate achievements

In that respect, what do the European Physical Society and other European bodies do on the scale of Europe? At EPS I know about the Hewlett-Packard Physics Prize and topical awards from a few divisions (high-energy & particle physics, quantum electronics and optics, and maybe condensed matter). As for other European bodies, I am not aware of anything. Readers are welcome to correct me if I am wrong. For a population which can be roughly estimated to be something like 100,000 potential candidates, that it is not much. And for me, it is very far from enough.

What could the EPS do if it wishes to increase significantly the recognition of outstanding results in Europe without imposing on itself a huge and unbearable amount of work? I suggest that the EPS could take advantage of the work done within most of its national member societies to reveal the best results obtained in their own country, therefore avoiding duplicating a full analysis of all European research activity. So the tentative proposal which I submit for comments to all members (individuals, national societies, associate members) and acting bodies of the EPS is the following:

- EPS, through its Council, after an Executive Committee proposal, will create a Prize and Award Committee (PAC).
- The composition of the PAC will be: the Executive Committee (11 members), one representative of each division or interdivisional group designated by its division or interdivisional group and renewed at least every 4 years (13 members). Some of these representatives should be helped by an assisting committee, to be sure to cover the field for which they are responsible (for example the assisting committee of the

Condensed Matter Division representative could be made of representatives of the sections of the Division, one for each).

- The PAC will be chaired by the President of EPS and will designate one of its members to follow the administrative work done by the EPS staff. It will meet once a year in connection with one regular Executive Committee meeting, all the preparation being made by e-mail. The administrative director will attend the yearly meeting, keep track of the decisions and insure all the appropriate mailings.
- To be receivable by the PAC, the candidates to the European prizes and awards will have to be proposed by a national society member of EPS, as a recent winner (within the last two or three years and updated each year) of a national prize, award or medal; the designation conditions, a CV and a signed scientific report should be provided for each candidate by the national society.
- The number, the profile, the name and other features of the European prizes and awards will be progressively fixed by the PAC without a priori rules.
- The future laureates, besides proper citations in the specialised journals world-wide, will constitute the reserve of invited speakers for the general conference of EPS, as well as for its divisional and interdivisional meetings. Their achievements will be publicised in *Europhysics News*.
- An award ceremony will be included in the yearly Council meeting agenda, in which one or two scientific talks will be presented.

By making this tentative proposal (which has not yet been submitted to the Executive Committee) I hope readers will react freely, particularly if they imagine better procedures, or if they feel strongly against it (as usual, I will assume that no comment means approval). It seems to me that this is one of the roles the EPS should play within the physics community. At a time when electronic communication generates an uncontrolled overflow of useless information, one indeed needs more and more help to recognise matters of strong actual interest and to identify those who have been our leaders and pioneers.

contact *Claude Sébenne* (Vice-secretary, EPS Executive Committee) at *Université Pierre et Marie Curie, Paris*