

THE PHYCOLOGIST



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Editor: **Bruce Osborne**

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Editorial

Just recently I finished a lecture with the quotation by Arthur Conan Doyle; 'It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data'. Not a particularly original quotation, perhaps, but one with wide applicability in science. How often, for instance, have we extended our own pet ideas or preconceptions beyond the realms of experimental proof? 'I know I have', is certainly not a statement restricted to a Monty Python sketch, nor is it restricted to one or two honest individuals. The fact is, almost all of us have done this at one time or another, to various degrees. Speculation is, however, not fabrication and informed speculation does serve as the basis for further experimentation. The point is not to allow such speculation to cloud our interpretation of experimental results. Without ideas we will have no basis for experimentation and really good ideas do not arise that often, believe me! Without realising it the quotation was presented in the shadow of the portraits of two men, Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace, who probably shared in one of the greatest ideas in science, the 'theory' of evolution. Much of what they proposed, even speculated on, and based on limited experimental evidence, has largely turned out to be true and provided the basis for much of contemporary scientific thinking. Modern science is, however, in my view, becoming more restrictive and not as amenable to new ideas as it probably once was. Even if these ideas turn out to be wrong, they can result in new and important advances, so let's not be too critical of speculative, but interesting, ideas that don't always appear to fit the data, or provide alternative explanations for some previously 'accepted' observations. Where would we be, for instance, without any new ideas that challenged existing dogma? Surely this is the way that science progresses?

