

EDITORIAL

It might seem to an outsider that academics are now devoting more attention to their travel agents than their students. With so many international conferences, congresses, seminars, symposia and workshops taking place each year, it is becoming difficult to draw up an itinerary for the international circuit. This obsession with travel has even caught the attention of the writer; in *Professional foul* Tom Stoppard structured his play around the visit of an English professor ostensibly to an overseas conference but in reality to watch his national team in a football match. Not surprisingly cynical observers question the expenditure of large sums in travelling to remote and exotic locations to present papers at sessions which may not even last an hour.

Is this a fair assessment of international meetings? Undoubtedly, there is an element of truth in such accusations. Some conferences seem to offer very little in terms of stimulating papers. In any case, the papers may be available in published proceedings. But to judge the matter solely on this basis is to ignore the value that personal attendance can offer. In the first place, conference proceedings frequently appear months or even years after the actual event. In a rapidly developing field such as information technology a time-lag of this magnitude renders much of the material obsolete. Secondly, the important parts of an international gathering are often the informal meetings in bars, restaurants and so on, rather than the formal sessions, and this is no less true for having been said before. Furthermore, as research and development become increasingly international in scope, face-to-face contacts are imperative if the technological gap between the developed and developing countries is not to widen still further. Although tele- and computer-conferencing are now technically feasible, it is interesting to note that they have in no way lessened the number of traditional conferences taking place. Writing in an article published in *Nature* in 1965, Derek de Solla Price, commenting on the 'Invisible College', "the group of everybody who is anybody in the field" made the point that "By substituting the technology of transportation for that of publication they keep warm the seats of jet planes and commune with each other at small select conferences and seminars throughout the world" [1]. In fact, an increasing preoccupation with *both* transportation *and* publication has been the hallmark of the 'gate keepers' in the library and information scene, and is likely to continue in the future.

R.F. Guy and J.A. Large
Editors

1. Derek de Solla Price. The scientific foundations of science policy. *Nature* 206 (1965) 233–238.