

Preface for the ESP series in photochemical and photobiological sciences

“Its not the substance, it’s the dose which makes something poisonous!” When Paracelsius, a German physician of the 14th century made this statement he probably did not think about light as one of the most obvious environmental factors. But his statement applies as well to light. While we need light for example for vitamin D production too much light might cause skin cancer. The dose makes the difference. These diverse findings of light effects have attracted the attention of scientists for centuries. The photosciences represent a dynamic multidisciplinary field which includes such diverse subjects as behavioral responses of single cells, cures for certain types of cancer and the protective potential of tanning lotions. It includes photobiology and photochemistry, photomedicine as well as the technology for light production, filtering and measurement. Light is a common theme in all these areas. In recent decades a more molecular centered approach changed both the depth and the quality of the theoretical as well as the experimental foundation of photosciences.

An example of the relationship between global environment and the biosphere is the recent discovery of ozone depletion and the resulting increase in high energy ultraviolet radiation. The hazardous effects of high energy ultraviolet radiation on all living systems is now well established. This discovery of the result of ozone depletion put photosciences at the center of public interest with the result that, in an unparalleled effort, scientists and politicians worked closely together to come to international agreements to stop the pollution of the atmosphere.

The changed recreational behavior and the correlation with several diseases in which sunlight or artificial light sources play a major role in the causation of clinical conditions (e.g. porphyrias, polymorphic photodermatoses, Xeroderma pigmentosum and skin cancers) have been well documented. As a result, in some countries (e.g. Australia) public services inform people about the potential risk of extended periods of sun exposure every day. The problems are often aggravated by the photo-toxic or photoallergic reactions produced by a variety of environmental pollutants, food additives or therapeutic and cosmetic drugs. On the other hand, if properly used, light-stimulated processes can induce important beneficial effects in biological systems, such as the elucidation of several aspects of cell structure and function.

Novel developments are centered around photodiagnostic and phototherapeutic modalities for the treatment of cancer, arteriosclerosis, several autoimmune diseases, neonatal jaundice and others. In addition, classic research areas such as vision and photosynthesis are still very active. Some of these developments are unique to photobiology, since the peculiar physico-chemical properties of electronically excited biomolecules often lead to the promotion of reactions which are characterized by high levels of selectivity in space and time. Besides the biologically centered areas, technical developments have paved the way for the harnessing of solar energy to produce warm water and electricity or the development of environmentally friendly techniques for addressing problems of large social impact (e.g. the decontamination of polluted waters). While also in use in Western countries, these techniques are of great interest for developing countries.

The European Society for Photobiology (ESP) is an organization for developing and coordinating the very different fields of photosciences in terms of public knowledge and scientific interests. Due to the ever increasing demand for a comprehensive overview of the photosciences the ESP decided to initiate an encyclopedic series, the "Comprehensive Series in Photochemical and Photobiological Sciences". This series is intended to give an in-depth coverage over all the very different fields related to light effects. It will allow investigators, physicians, students, industry and laypersons to obtain an updated record of the state-of-the-art in specific fields, including a ready access to the recent literature. Most importantly, such reviews give a critical evaluation of the directions that the field is taking, outline hotly debated or innovative topics and even suggest a redirection if appropriate. It is our intention to produce the monographs at a sufficiently high rate to generate a timely coverage of both well established and emerging topics. As a rule, the individual volumes are commissioned; however, comments, suggestions or proposals for new subjects are welcome.

Donat P. Häder and Giulio Jori
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