Introduction

The search for sexually enhancing drugs has a long and largely fruitless history. In the past decade, the pharmaceutical industry has shown renewed interest, mainly in finding pharmacological agents which might prove useful in the clinical management of sexual problems. An additional issue, of increasing importance, is the occurrence of sexual side effects from modern pharmacological treatments.

When the Esteve Foundation approached me about the possibility of organising a symposium on the subject, I pointed out that at the present time there was a striking contrast in relevant scientific developments in the animal, particularly rodent field and the human. There have been impressive advances in our understanding of the neurobiology and associated pharmacology of rodent sexual behaviour, both in relation to specific aspects of such behaviour (e.g. appetitive or consummatory) and also in relation to localisation of the underlying brain mechanisms.

In the human field there has been little attempt to identify what specific effects a potentially 'pro-sexual' drug might have on the individual's sexual responsiveness, and hence a lack of appropriate methods for assessing such effects.

The likelihood of finding a drug which predictably enhances sexual response in humans remains unclear. As we shall see in this symposium, the animal data show us that brain mechanisms relevant to sexuality are also involved in other types of appetitive behaviour, and whether there is a specific pharmacology of sexual function remains a key question. The determinants of the unequivocally sexual quality of an experience remain elusive.

Furthermore, neurotransmitters - and it is the monoamines which have received the most attention - are seen to be involved in a variety of mechanisms depending on their site of action, in some cases mechanisms which might be working against each other. What can we therefore realistically expect from a neurotransmitter manipulating drug which can only be administered systemically?

In this symposium we have brought together some of the principal researchers in both the animal and human fields of sexual pharmacology. The interaction between them, found in the edited discussions, adds a useful dimension to their individual papers.

John Bancroft, editor.