

Human history is peppered with wars, conflicts and individual vendettas and despite all the hopes and aspirations that accompanied the dawn of the new millennium, here we are, two decades in and the world is in an unwanted political maelstrom of probably the greatest magnitude since the Second World War.

I have been watching in horror the aftermath of the assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. By the time this article appears in print I am hoping that common sense will have prevailed and that all sides will have pulled back from an attack and counter-attack strategy and that communication and diplomacy are seen as the preferred and more constructive way forward from a dangerous situation. At this moment, we are still poised in a waiting game to see if either side is about to launch a salvo upon the other; irrespective of allegiances, I do not think “pistols at dawn” is the best way to resolve a deeply difficult and highly charged situation.

There is surely not a single person reading this who has not witnessed the damaging and long-lasting effects of conflicts, whether in the laboratory, between friends or within families. There is not a magic formula for solving relationship problems, whether between nation states or individuals, particularly if the opposing sides hold radically and diametrically opposing views, and fisticuffs, even of a high-tech military

DEALING WITH CONFLICT



Sarah May, IBMS Deputy Chief Executive, on the damaging effects of conflict and the hope of change

nature, rarely solves anything. It still comes down to good old low-tech dialogue and diplomacy.

Throughout my working life the thing I have found most damaging, and difficult to manage, has been interpersonal conflicts. They have a nasty, pernicious habit of poisoning a whole environment and creating a highly unpleasant working atmosphere, not just for those immediately concerned, but also for those in the wider environment. I think my greatest professional achievements have not been of a scientific nature, but have been the occasions I have been able to pull someone away from a destructive behavioural path and helped them to understand the impact of their actions and for me to perhaps help others to understand the reason for their behaviour.

This leads me on to an article in this

month’s edition that I found profoundly moving; it is the piece by Colin Mudd about his experience over 40-plus years in pathology as a gay man, and of the changing attitudes towards LBGTQ individuals. It left me feeling good about our workforce, a workforce that has grown in its attitudes and one that is tolerant and accepting. Perhaps if there were more individuals in the world like Colin and his many colleagues, tolerance and acceptance would be the norm and we wouldn’t be in the mess that we find ourselves in at this moment.

Sarah May
Deputy Chief Executive



Institute of Biomedical Science is the professional body for the biomedical science profession.

INSTITUTE OF BIOMEDICAL SCIENCE
12 Coldbath Square
London, EC1R 5HL
United Kingdom
+44 (0)20 7713 0214
+44 (0)20 7837 9658
Email: mail@ibms.org
Web: www.ibms.org

PRESIDENT
Allan Wilson CSci FIBMS

CHIEF EXECUTIVE
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Lynda Rigby

EDUCATION AND TRAINING
education@ibms.org

EXAMINATIONS
examinations@ibms.org

MEMBERSHIP
mc@ibms.org

CHARTERED SCIENTIST
chartered@ibms.org

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