TAB of TiBS

‘TAB’ has been drawing cartoons for Trends in Biochemical Sciences (TiBS) for 30 years. Here, he talks to General Editor Richard Reece

Q. When did you first start drawing cartoons?
A. I was always drawing as a child, but I suppose the first time that I tried to caricature people and execute more complicated cartoon drawings was when I was a PhD student in Birmingham. I drew rather unflattering cartoons of my supervisors and colleagues.

Q. Did you have any formal training?
A. No. I was forced to drop Art in the Fourth Form at school in favour of Chemistry, Physics, Biology and Maths. I suppose, like many other people, I found myself squeezed out of subjects that I enjoyed because of the more rigid curricula in place then. I did do a one-term night class in oil painting some years later, but that was well before I took up cartooning for TiBS.

Q. How did you get started, and how did you get involved with TiBS?
A. My PhD supervisors, Brian Finean and Roger Coleman (with Bob Michell, who was their post-doc at the time) were asked to write a textbook on ‘Membranes and their Cellular Functions’. The intention of the publishers and authors was to give it a wider appeal than the usual biochemistry textbook by including a few mode-of-action cartoons, and they asked me to do the drawings. By the time the book went into a second edition, I was doing a post-doc in the U.S.A.

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Q. Are most of your drawings commissioned? Does an editor, or anyone else, tell you what subject to choose? Or do you draw what is of interest to you?
A. The usual process is that the editor of TiBS chooses an article from those submitted to TiBS for publication, and sends a copy of the article to me with a request for a cartoon and giving me a deadline. The reasons that the editor picks a particular article vary. In some cases, the article itself may already seem to lend itself to a cartoon. However, one past editor (no names, no pack drill) confided that he sent me articles that “needed something to liven them up!”. All the work I do for TiBS is commissioned — I have only once drawn a cartoon that is solely of interest to me (for my boss in the U.S.A).

Q. Where do you get your inspiration for the drawings?
A. That’s very difficult to answer. Because the articles are invariably on a subject with which I am unfamiliar, the first thing I have to do is to read through the article carefully (often several times), highlighting and jotting down the salient scientific facts, and trying to get my head around the processes they describe. I then let things ‘cook’ for a few days and mull them around in my head. Once I get ‘the idea’ that will form the basis for the cartoon, I roughly scribble out the outline of the cartoon in pencil, A3-sized. Then shift the lettering and figures around to balance the drawing and get the scale of the figures correct. Once this is done, I do a rough draft in pen and ink on tracing paper. This allows me to make any final alterations. I then execute the final drawing.

Q. Is there any (biological) topic that you would not attempt to draw?
A. No. I can (and do) attempt to draw anything, but whether it works or not is another matter entirely.

Q. Do you submit a draft to see if there is interest before going on to a full drawing?
A. No, because TiBS have commissioned the cartoon, I already know that they are interested. However, if I am unsure that I have got the science right, I will sometimes send a copy of the rough sketch to TiBS and ask them to check with the authors that the science is correct. It’s amazing how just one line in the wrong place can completely alter the science, or imply that something is known when it isn’t. Indeed, knowing where and how to put ‘ambiguity’ into a drawing is often the most difficult part of the process!

Q. How long does a typical drawing take from start to finish?
A. How long is a piece of string? Sometimes, the reading of the article takes several days, or even weeks, before I feel that I have grasped the concepts well enough to even start! Sometimes, I need to read other articles or reviews in order to get the information I need for the drawing. At other times, I get an idea for a drawing very quickly. The time taken to draw the cartoon varies, depending on its size and complexity. Obviously, the bigger and more complicated the drawing, the longer it takes. It usually takes about half a day to execute the final drawing of a large cartoon. But it can have taken weeks to get to that stage.

Q. How many do you draw a year?
A. Again, this varies from year to year. Sometimes the editor doesn’t get any articles that he/she thinks might lend themselves to the TAB treatment, and I therefore have very few requests. In some years, I have done 6–7 in a single year, though that is unusual!

Q. What proportion of drawings never make it out of your studio?
A. None! So far (touch wood!) I have always managed to come up with a cartoon when asked (though sometimes, it’s been touch-and-go right up to the last minute!). TiBS are also pretty flexible, and are often willing to adjust their deadlines a little to work around holidays, workload, etc. [The word] ‘studio’ is a little misleading. I draw on my dining table, using the same drawing plate I have had since I began.

Q. Have you ever had an idea for a cartoon rejected?
A. Indeed I have, although only...
three rejections in 30+ years is not a bad strike rate, I suppose!
One cartoon was rejected because it was ‘too political’ (it remains one of my favourites, though it will never see the light of day!). A second was rejected because it was ‘sexist’ (It was. And I was then hauled over the coals by the author, and instructed to include more women biochemists in my drawings thereafter!). The third was turned down because the authors simply did not like it, and gave no reason. I have (rarely) had to do a complete re-draw of a cartoon because of concerns about infringement of copyright, or other such matters beyond my ken, but on the whole, the cartoons have been well received.

Q. Which is your favourite cartoon, and why?
A. That’s a tough one. I’ve done so many that I get a kick out of seeing again, for quite different reasons. Some of my favourites are not great works of art (are any?), but I enjoy them because I recall the struggle I had with them, and the pleasure of seeing them finally in print.

Q. Which other cartoonists do you admire?
A. I am full of admiration for all professional cartoonists! To be able to come up with a cartoon that makes other people laugh, or makes them stop and think, is a wonderful gift. Knowing what a challenge it is to complete one cartoon in a month, I stand in awe of those artists who draw cartoons for a daily paper, week after week after week.

Q. Where did the name TAB come from? And why do you wish to remain anonymous?
A. My initials are TAB. In the early days, I think the editor of *TiBS* at the time wanted to protect me from being snowed under by requests from people who wanted a TAB cartoon to liven up their slide presentation at conferences, and the anonymity just kind of continued thereafter. There was one occasion when a visiting scientist gave a seminar to our department, and used one of my cartoons in his presentation. This cartoon was rejected because of concerns about infringement of copyright, or other such matters beyond my ken, but on the whole, the cartoons have been well received.

Q. At question time, my PhD student at the time stood up and asked him whether he had paid a copyright fee and asked for permission to use the cartoon! As I shrank under my seat, I was never more glad of anonymity, and so relieved that he never discovered that I was in the audience! (If the person involved still suffers from outbreaks of acute embarrassment at the mention of this event, I humbly apologize for my student. He’s not changed a bit.)

A bit “too political” — the cartoon that was rejected sees the light of day at last.