

An occasional column, in which Caveman and other troglodytes involved in cell science emerge to share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Caveman and other contributors can be left at caveman@biologists.com. Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.



A pod of botanists, an affinity of pharmacologists, an aggregate of structural biologists? No, the collective noun is 'department'

When you see a number of geese together you know that the collective noun is a 'gaggle'; or when you look into the ocean and see fish swimming together you know that the collective noun is a 'shoal'. But is the collective noun for a group of botanists a 'pod', or molecular biologists a 'clone' (two molecular biologists would, of course, be a 'sub-clone'), or biochemists a 'reaction', or structural biologists an 'aggregate' (the very best, however, would be referred to as a 'lattice'), or pharmacologists an 'affinity', or zoologists a 'cage'? While these are interesting possibilities, and I could go on (a 'network' of neurobiologists, an 'infection' of virologists, a 'plaque' of

bacteriologists?), the traditional collective noun for all groupings of scientists is 'department'.

Attempts have been made to specify 'department' for use as a collective noun for unique groupings of scientists by adding a simple descriptor - for example, Department of Biochemistry, Department of Genetics, or Department of Developmental Biology. Alternatively, the collective noun has been sub-specialized - for example, Department of Molecular Pharmacology. Or, an amalgam of collective nouns has been used - for example, Department of Cell Biology and Anatomy.

The reason that these corruptions of 'department' do not work as collective nouns for specific scientists is that the groupings do not reflect the types of scientist in them. For example, Departments of Biochemistry are full of molecular biologists, developmental biologists, cell biologists - you name the speciality, and there is probably a Department of Biochemistry somewhere

