

Go to the ant

It was early May, the traditional time for drilling wheat in our part of Australia. As the days passed everyone was getting noticeably more worried. Every time he'd go out Dad would cast an anxious eye heavenwards, but the skies remained monotonously clear as they'd done for the last four months. We would sometimes spy him squinting at the barometer, almost willing the atmospheric pressure to drop....

Then one morning dawned overcast. 'Do you think it's going to rain?' Pat Williamson our share-farmer asked. How would I know? I was only eleven. For some reason, though, instead of surveying the skies my eyes caught sight of an ant's nest. That morning it was a hive of activity. Ants seemed to be scurrying in every direction. 'Sure it's going to rain', I answered. 'Can't you see the ants on the move?' Pat laughed out loud but, sure enough, as evening drew in, the temperature suddenly dropped, the west wind blew up and down came the rain, a great sound on a hot tin roof. If I remember rightly we had a bumper harvest that year.

Ants. We know that no individual ant possesses any great intelligence, but collectively their achievements are amazing. These animals work without any apparent pre-planning and entirely without supervision. Certain species of ants are noted for being able to find the shortest path to food, merely by laying and following chemical trails.

It works something like this. Two ants leave the nest at the same time and taking different routes find the same food source. On the way their bodies emit a trail of pheromone. The ant taking the shortest route to the food will return first and since his trail is marked with twice the amount of

pheromone compared to the route traced by his colleague, other ants will follow his route. Very soon, and very efficiently, a food convoy will form up and the ants will work away until the food source is exhausted or sufficient has been gathered in.

I was surprised to learn recently that ants have become an object of interest for industry and commerce, in particular by organisations looking for creative new approaches to solving complex logistical problems. This is especially so among companies making telecommunications systems, airfreight operators, and providers of complex delivery systems for products like domestic heating oil. All are benefitting from the study of what's been labelled 'swarm intelligence'.

But why should I be surprised? Some 3,000 years ago the writer of the Proverbs noticed that humans stood to gain from observing the behaviour of ants. 'Go to the ant... consider its ways and be wise!' counsels the greatest sage of the ancient Hebrew people. (Proverbs 6:6).

In medicine there needs to be a functional hierarchy, so I somehow doubt that doctors can expect to discover how to do complex procedures without either pre-planning or systems of supervision. But doctors do work in multidisciplinary teams and can always benefit from insights about teamwork. And above everything else, considering the ant might remind us to try to shape our approach to teamwork to ensure, for example, that the best ideas and contributions of even the most junior or lowly team member are recognised, encouraged and when possible used.

John Martin
Associate Editor of Triple Helix