

The Zaragoza Vet School

A flea, though he kill none, he does all the harm he can.

John Donne, *Devotions*, 1623

The office of Professor Javier Lucientes-Curdi had a crack across the floor. It was not a fine hair-line but a seemingly inexorably widening gap – right through the grey tiles and deep into the underlying cement. Furthermore, it lay between the door to his office and his large desk near the window. This gave the impression that, desk and all, he was about to topple backwards and disappear several floors below.

A new veterinary school for the University of Zaragoza was certainly being planned. The present building, some said, had already been condemned – or was that yet another case of my poor grasp of the Spanish subjunctive? Perhaps they implied it *should* have been condemned.

Professor Lucientes had long ago given up on the lack of forward planning among bureaucrats and had learned to live with the situation. He simply got on with life. He was much in demand by students and other academics and it was said – only half-jokingly – that it could take him as much as an hour and a half to go to the bathroom; everyone kept stopping him in the corridor for a social chat, to seek help or to discuss their latest research results.

These social activities weren't confined to the University. In the evenings in the city centre it was not unusual to see him two or three times: briefly chatting to students who had invited him to join them in a restaurant, then in serious discussion with a lonely-looking man in a heavy coat, or, if they caught up with him, arm-in-arm with his family for the evening stroll or *paseo*. His gregariousness and attitude to life were infectious; they spread readily to his students and generated an enthusiasm that overcame any inadequacies of office and laboratory facilities.

I first made contact with Lucientes' group through Juan Jose Osacar, Juanjo for short, when I was working on rabbit fleas in Andalucía. Juanjo was also working on rabbit fleas, under Lucientes' guidance, but their interest lay in reducing flea abundance to minimise the spread of myxomatosis among Spanish rabbits. This was, of course, in absolute contrast to my objective of looking for new fleas that might be better carriers of myxoma virus in Australia. Nonetheless, once contact had been made we got on like a house on fire because of our shared interest in fleas and their ecology.

On my first visit to the vet school in Zaragoza, the students in Lucientes' group invited me to have a meal with them. It was a cold, miserable day and we crowded around a large table in a warm apartment to eat the meal they had prepared. Everyone spoke with me in English; some spoke English well but even those who were less proficient struggled along, partly to practise and partly to cope with my limited Spanish. After the meal, we piled into a large van one of the students had borrowed and ventured out into the stormy countryside to