

# Chapter Three

## Implementing change

The decision to incorporate, professionalise and nationalise the Australian Society for Microbiology heralded a transformation. After lengthy debate, spanning the best part of a decade, the steady evolution of the Society gave way to rapid change. Implementation commenced immediately. Membership categories changed and continued to evolve throughout the 1980s as the ASM adapted to the needs of its broadening membership base. Relationships with state branches and communication with members became increasingly important. Maintaining its unique character, closeness and sense of community despite its rapid growth became a major challenge for the ASM.

### A new approach to membership

Membership was one of the first, and perhaps most major, changes to the structure and organisation of the ASM post incorporation. Membership of the Society had shifted from being processed purely by state branches to being assessed and coordinated by the newly incorporated national body. In addition, members were now able to apply for full professional membership of the Society. Five categories of membership were offered – associate, student, sustaining, honorary and a new category of professional membership for those with at least two years of experience in the field. Those admitted to this final category were able to use the letters MASM after their name and were referred to as big ‘M’ Members of the Society.

With the new task of coordinating membership lists, fees and membership renewals as well as assessing candidates seeking professional membership, a new membership committee was essential. The Qualifications Committee was established in 1976, immediately after incorporation. It comprised three members from each state branch as well as a committee chair. As the Constitution of the incorporated ASM required members of both the Qualifications Committee and the newly established National Council be full professional Members themselves, they were amongst the first group granted MASM status. There were 37 Members declared in 1976, including all Past Presidents of the ASM.<sup>1</sup>

To streamline the process, state branches assessed MASM applications and then passed them on to the Qualifications Committee. After this second level, the Qualifications Committee presented new candidates to Council for final ratification. To be granted membership of the ASM was of unquestionable benefit to many; the acronym MASM carried the weight of the national society that represented the discipline and the profession of microbiology. By 1980, the ASM had a total of 2087 members, of whom 481 were MASM.<sup>2</sup> The Qualifications Committee was in full operation and, thanks to the computing facilities provided by the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories, the Society had moved from handwritten membership registers to computerised lists.

Opposition to the professionalisation of the Society had been motivated by concerns that the proposed changes would ostracise those ineligible for the MASM category and detract from the broad appeal of the Society. The steady increase in membership applications for MASM, along with the other categories, spoke volumes about the decision to alter the ASM’s membership structure. Not only was the new category



*MASM status was first awarded in 1976. The first group of 37 members included all Past Presidents of the Society.*  
Courtesy Solly Faine.



MASM numbers continued to rise and by 1980, out of a total 2087 ASM members, 481 were MASM.

highly sought after, and therefore clearly of professional value, but the newly professionalised Society had retained its appeal to those eligible for student, associate or sustaining membership as numbers in these categories also continued to rise.

Perhaps because of the success and relatively smooth implementation of the new membership structure, by the early 1980s further change was being called for by members. The need for an additional and higher category of professional membership was raised. The establishment of a Fellowship category was not a new idea. It had been mooted several times throughout the ASM's history. The push for the introduction of the Fellowship in the 1980s came largely from microbiologists working in clinical and diagnostic environments. Without the clear career progression paths and structures provided by an academic framework, it was difficult for these ASM members to demonstrate the experience and expertise required to gain promotion.<sup>3</sup> Their experience was often vast and their contribution to the field great, but it was



With the help of computing facilities provided by the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories, by the beginning of the 1980s the Society moved to computerised membership lists.

hard to qualify and quantify – a problem that was particularly challenging when applying for high-level positions in hospitals and diagnostic laboratories.

The Australian Association for Clinical Biochemists had addressed a similar need for its members by introducing an examination and qualification procedure that saw successful members granted a Fellowship of the society – or FAACB. As well as being approved and recognised by the National Pathology Accreditation Advisory Committee, the FAACB set standards for pathology in the medical profession, and was recognised within the New South Wales scientific industrial awards as being a professional qualification.<sup>4</sup> Aware of the need to support its members, the ASM National Council began to explore options of qualification via the Royal College of Pathologists and the Federal Government.<sup>5</sup> But, as the 1980s commenced, it became increasingly clear that the development of an ASM Fellowship was the most appropriate solution.

In 1988 the Australian Society for Microbiology introduced a new category of membership – Fellowship of the ASM (FASM). It was the result of working parties, reports to Council, canvassing of members and state branches and, finally, an Extraordinary General Meeting at which the Fellowship was ratified and introduced. Candidates for the Fellowship were in the hands of the National Examinations Board (NEB), which was established to manage the process. In a sense, the implementation of FASM, at least initially, was similar to the introduction of MASM. Fellowships were awarded, on assessment of curriculum vitae, to those Members who already held PhDs or who could demonstrate outstanding contribution to the discipline of microbiology. A total of 44 Members were granted Fellowship in 1989 based on their standing in the field.



Fellowship of the ASM (FASM) was introduced as a formal professional qualification in 1988. The following year, 44 members were granted FASM status. Courtesy John Goldsmid.



This cartoon in *Australian Microbiologist* in 1985 hints at the tension between different types of microbiologists.

A rigorous two-part examination procedure was also developed for those seeking the formal qualification. The first part of the examination procedure was an assessment of the candidate's general knowledge of microbiology. In essence it was intended to ensure a level of knowledge equivalent to that of an undergraduate student majoring in microbiology.<sup>6</sup> The members of the National Examinations Board would then carry out an inspection of the candidate's workplace. Over a period of two or three years the candidate was required to write a dissertation in a specialist subject and sit an in-depth examination to assess their level of expertise in this same area. While the process was involved and potentially daunting for candidates, it was essential if the Fellowship was to become a highly valued and sought after professional qualification that could be used for the specific purpose of career advancement.

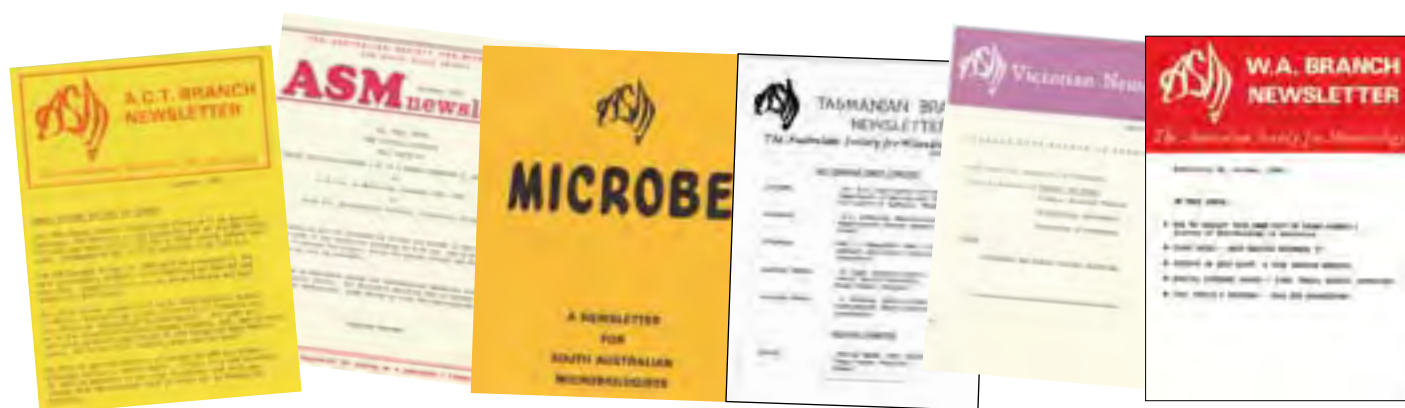
In 1989, five candidates sat the first part of the formal Fellowship examination, of whom four were successful and progressed to the next stage.<sup>7</sup> While the Fellowship award was directed at clinical microbiologists in response to the need they had identified, it was

important that all ASM members were able to apply for Fellowship. Like the first group of Members awarded FASM in 1989, those holding a PhD, coordinating a research group, or having significant publications of international standard could apply to be granted Fellowship. It was an important option to offer if the ASM was to remain inclusive and cater for both its academic and clinical-based members. In fact, some Members chose to apply for Fellowship purely to demonstrate support for the introduction of the new category of membership and for their clinical and diagnostic colleagues.<sup>8</sup>

There was, without doubt, criticism of the ASM for offering the Fellowship. Much of this echoed the dissent raised around the time of incorporation, nationalisation and professionalisation. Why should the Society offer options for professionals? Those who disagreed with the membership changes felt that they would take the Society further from its learned origins. To them, the career progression of medical, clinical and diagnostic microbiologists should not be the concern of the ASM. But – however vocal – the critics were in the minority. The introduction of FASM represented the growing diversity of the ASM. It reaffirmed that the decision to professionalise had indeed been shrewd. Not only was it necessary then, but a need for further professionalisation had since been identified and met. The decision to introduce the Fellowship showed that the ASM could respond to members and their needs. It also strongly affirmed that in addition to being a highly valued and established learned society, it was a thriving and dynamic professional society.

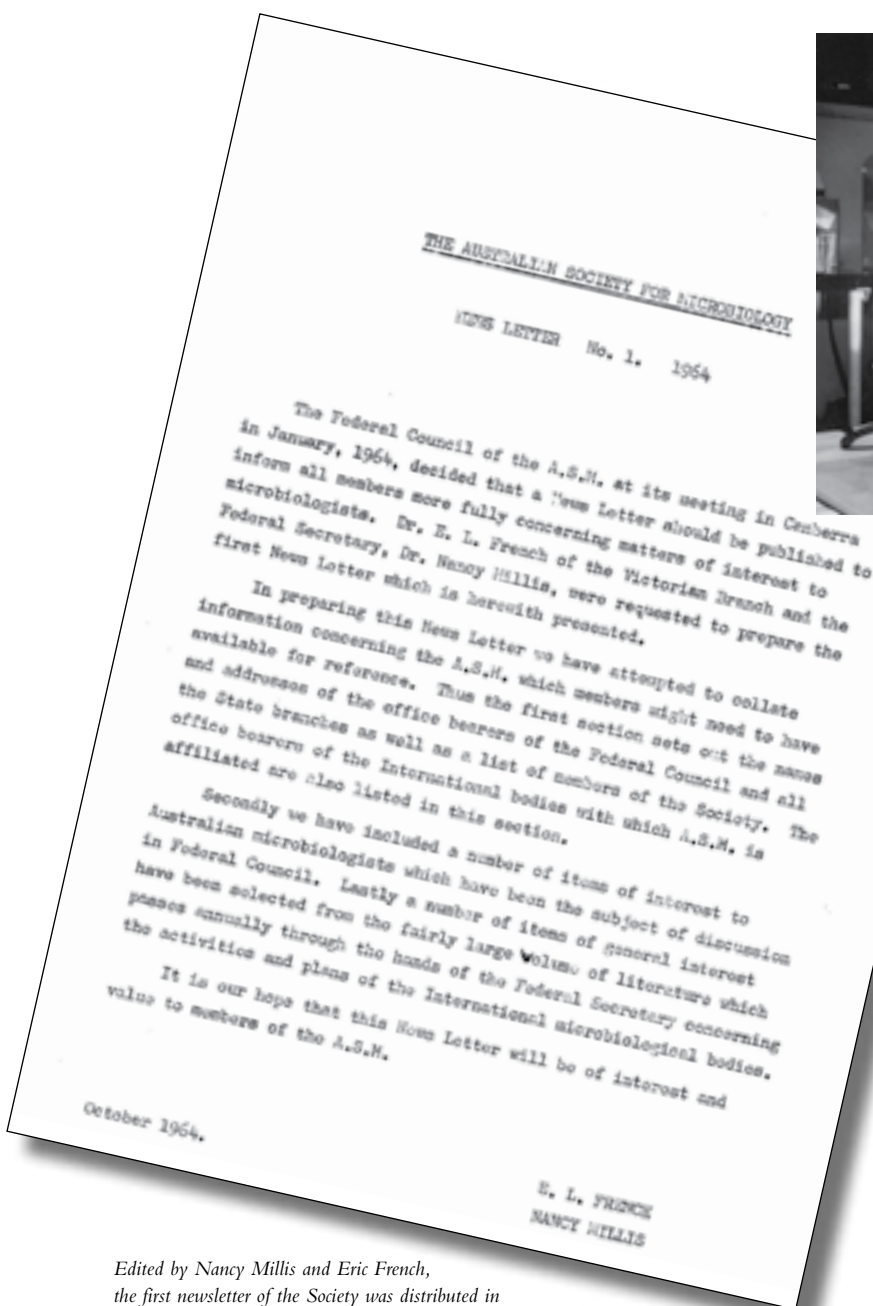
### Communication and community

As the ASM grew and diversified, communication became increasingly important – both with state branches and with members. The strength of the ASM as a federal and later national body had always relied on the health and dynamism of the state branches. Australia-wide activities like the Annual Scientific Meetings were complemented by state-based activities and gatherings. But as the roles and nature of the ASM began to evolve, the national body began to rely on state branches in a different way. State activities were as important as ever, but the importance of the branches as disseminators of information and implementers of change had increased.



Newsletters produced by state branches were an important way to maintain regular contact with members, informing them of scholarships, awards, meetings and other activities.





Phyllis Rountree and Jim Vincent took over production of the newsletter in the late 1960s and introduced a professionally printed publication.  
Courtesy Adolph Basser Library, Australian Academy of Science.

*Edited by Nancy Millis and Eric French,  
the first newsletter of the Society was distributed in  
1964 as a way of establishing direct communication with members.*

While it varied from state to state, each of the branches maintained relatively regular and direct contact with its members. Newsletters were distributed frequently and meetings were often a monthly occurrence. These forums were encouraged by the national body – the states and their activities were heavily leaned upon to help build the microbiology community in Australia. As the 1980s progressed, state branches had become even more important as a point of communication – a vehicle through which changes and their impact could be communicated to all members. As well as items of local interest, newsletters contained updates from National Council meetings with news on standing committees, visiting speakers,

scholarships and awards, Special Interest Groups, and notices of upcoming meetings.

The Constitution of the ASM had always ensured state representation on National Council. The Qualifications Committee and other important standing committees had similar requirements to ensure that the differing interests and needs of states were taken into account. However, communicating directly with members who were not involved in state branch committees was important if changes like membership categories, new national structures and the introduction of discipline-based Special Interest Groups were to be implemented smoothly. The dissemination of information to



Between 1976 and 1979, edited first by Peter Cooper and later by Geoffrey Noonan, ASM News increased in content and value to members with each edition. Portraits courtesy Adolph Basser Library, Australian Academy of Science.

members was crucial as the ASM continued to expand. One of the strengths of the Society was the sense of collegiality and community that permeated the Scientific Meetings and the associated social events. The challenge for the ASM was to maintain this characteristic atmosphere and sense of community as the membership of the Society grew.

While fostering relationships with the state branches and encouraging their activities and direct communication with members was one way to continue to reinforce the sense of community, the national body had to engage in its own activities. It had to be proactive. Ensuring that it had a regular, well-regarded, and highly anticipated point of communication with its members was essential. This came in the form a national journal for all members of the ASM that was coordinated, funded and distributed by the national body.

The founders of the ASM recognised the importance of direct communication with members. The first newsletter was distributed in October 1964. Edited by Nancy Millis and Eric French, it was hoped that 'this News Letter will be of interest and value to members of A.S.M'.<sup>13</sup> The issue contained a list of the Federal Council office bearers, a list of members of each branch, and items of interest such as the discussions of a subcommittee established to investigate the transport of perishable biological materials. Together French and Millis edited five editions of the newsletter before handing over to Phyllis Rountree and Jim Vincent who were the first to have the newsletter printed professionally.<sup>14</sup>

After incorporation, the circular began to change in form and content. It was given a new name – *ASM News* – and was edited first by Peter Cooper and later by Geoffrey Noonan. *ASM News*



With Associate Editors Carolyn Beaton and Peter Stewart, ASM News was produced and printed as a professional journal, incorporating articles with scientific and technical content in 1979.

Portraits courtesy Adolph Basser Library, Australian Academy of Science.

increased in frequency and 15 editions were issued between January 1976 and December 1979.<sup>15</sup> The newsletter was evolving into a journal that increased in content and value to members with each edition. In 1979, *ASM News* was produced and printed for the first time as a professional journal. The regular news items and Council-related matters remained, but articles with scientific and technical content were also included. Around the same time Noonan was joined by three Associate Editors – John Goldsmid, Carolyn Beaton and Peter Stewart. By the following year, Goldsmid had taken over as Editor.

A series of changes to the journal followed, beginning with a new name. In 1980 the publication became *Australian Microbiologist* to avoid confusion with the similarly named *ASM News* that was distributed by the American Society for Microbiology. Each year, Goldsmid was responsible for the publication of five issues of *Australian Microbiologist*. His contribution was immense. As well as producing the journal, he made decisions that meant it could be a sustainable endeavour. The cost of producing the journal had increased as its content expanded and it became more professional in appearance. Firmly of the belief that a journal should earn rather than cost the Society money, Goldsmid introduced advertising to the pages of *Australian Microbiologist*.<sup>16</sup> This significantly reduced the cost to the Society of producing the journal and meant that its quality could be increased.

In 1982 abstracts from the Annual Scientific Meeting began to be printed in *Australian Microbiologist* and distributed to all members. This tradition remains, with a special edition of the journal containing all abstracts being released in conjunction with the annual conference. Goldsmid's period as Editor was also characterised by the inclusion

of satirical cartoons, usually drawn by his partner Hilary. While they often inspired heated debate, these comic illustrations added an element of commentary and acerbic wit that was highly anticipated by members.

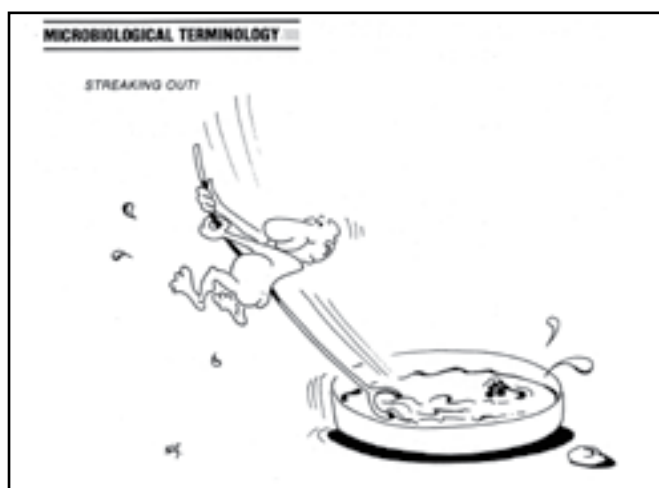
The work involved in producing *Australian Microbiologist* was colossal. Not only was the physical production of the journal managed and carried out almost entirely by Goldsmid but, with no formal editorial board, he was also responsible for the content. Sourcing and soliciting articles, liaising with printers, proofing and then physically distributing each issue were all time-consuming tasks. According to Goldsmid, the development and evolution of the journal mirrored that of the Society in general. There were similar patterns. Both had started as small, modest operations that aimed to build community and were dedicated to the science of microbiology. But, as they

grew and aged, the role of both Society and journal diversified and expanded. The Society had professionalised and was stronger for it. It was time for *Australian Microbiologist* to do the same.

As the 1990s commenced, the ongoing production and publication of the Society's journal, which in 1995 had been renamed *Microbiology Australia*, became an important topic of discussion at National Council. Its value was unquestionable. The journal was a point of communication with members and it also undoubtedly helped maintain a sense of community as the ASM continued to grow. In addition, the journal had become an important forum for scientific debate and discussion. But, it had become too large for a single editor. An editorial board was introduced to assist in the sourcing of articles and content. Later, under the leadership of Dick Groot Obbink, Council decided that *Microbiology Australia* would



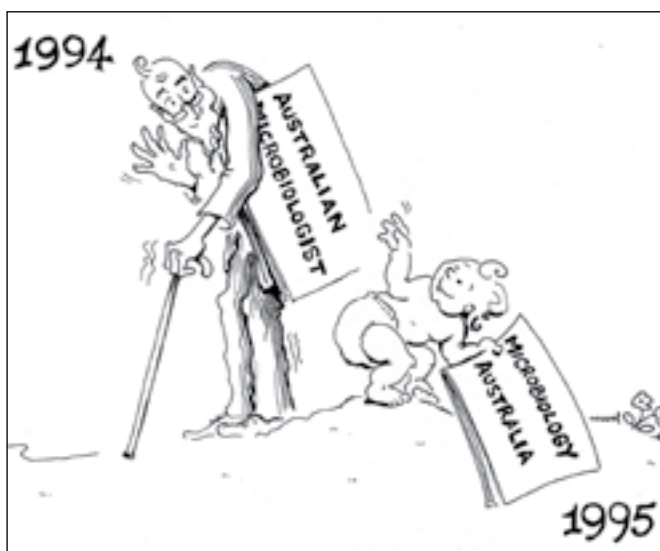
A selection of the popular cartoons that characterised John Goldsmid's period as editor and added a humorous element to *Australian Microbiologist* during the 1980s.







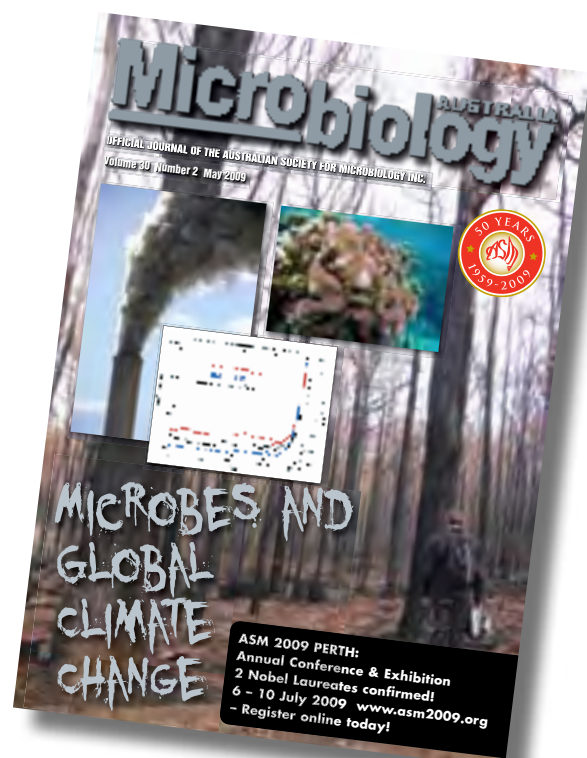
John Goldsmid was responsible for producing *Australian Microbiologist*, largely single-handedly, for more than a decade. Portrait courtesy Adolph Basser Library, Australian Academy of Science.



A changing of the guard – this cartoon summed up the name change of the Society's journal in 1995.

be aligned with a publisher that would manage the production and distribution of the journal.

Reed Business Publishing became responsible for the publication of *Microbiology Australia*. With layout, production and distribution taken care of, the editorial board could focus on the scientific and news content of the publication.<sup>17</sup> It was a logical move. Editorial control remained within the ASM, while farming out



*Microbiology Australia today – a long way from the Society's first newsletter in 1964.*

the publication components to a well-regarded publishing house ensured that *Microbiology Australia* could maintain its reputation as a high standard journal in both look and feel. The cost of producing the journal increased as a result of Reed's involvement. However, sponsorship and advertising counterbalanced these new overheads, with a business manager appointed by Reed to actively seek industry support for the journal.

The journal has continued to evolve, encompassing new developments and production standards. Since 2001 it has been published by Cambridge Media. Each phase in the evolution of the Society's journal has been significant. A highly regarded journal is without doubt a sign of a thriving Society.<sup>18</sup> *Microbiology Australia* remains an anticipated feature of ASM membership, representing a medium through which members can feel connected to the dynamic scientific community.

By the end of the 1980s, the ASM had risen to a difficult and demanding challenge. It had successfully implemented a new national, professional structure and managed to do so while retaining its defining characteristics and holding on to its original aims. As a result of its relationship with the state branches and the strengthening of its national activities, like the publication of *Australian Microbiologist* and later *Microbiology Australia*, the ASM managed to change and adapt while still maintaining its unique character, closeness and sense of community. A remarkable achievement.

### A social atmosphere

As well as being an excellent opportunity to hear world-class science, Annual Meetings have always provided an all important chance to socialise with colleagues. The ASM was – and still is – known as a particularly welcoming Society and many considered that, compared to other groups, ASM meetings were much friendlier. The Society has built a reputation as an inclusive association with a friendly nature and a good social mix, where it does not matter, according to Julian Rood, ‘whether you’re a professor or you’re a student ... That was the sort of meeting it was: it had no pretensions about it, there was tremendous mixing across the meeting, and it was a very open, friendly society’.<sup>9</sup>

This friendly atmosphere dates back to the early days of the ASM. John Pitt recalls that ‘One of the great things about ASM in those days ... is that it was an egalitarian society where people were

known by Christian name’.<sup>10</sup> Students and professors alike could discuss things one-to-one, which made for a ‘wonderfully effective and powerful group of people because the young people not only got encouragement, they got to listen to the real powers in this business’.<sup>11</sup>

ASM meetings were known for being particularly positive socially, for which John Christian believes there is a good explanation – ‘The reason for this is undoubtedly that, of all the sciences, there’s a bigger proportion of women in microbiology than almost any other, so that makes it a much more attractive place to be’. Unlike many societies, the ASM has always had a balance of gender and its strong female representation is considered a real advantage.

Enjoyable social functions have also been an important drawcard for the Annual Meeting. It is certainly true that social

events are readily recalled by attendees over many decades, and this is where the ASM is considered to have really excelled. While the scientific sessions were important – and always rigorous – the getting together of people was also highly valued. Social events were important for people to gather, to talk and to ‘let their hair down’<sup>12</sup>, which helped build a great amount of rapport amongst members. This has resulted in a long history of firm friendships formed at conferences, with people who met as students often still in contact many years later.

Many agree that as well as being the scientific highlight of the year, ASM meetings were also the social highlight. This relaxed and easy-going environment and the atmosphere of friendliness and collegiate stimulation is a tradition that successive Councils have tried to maintain.



### References

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4. Interview with Dick Groot Obbink, 28 April 2008.
5. Letter to Nancy Millis from Dr DK Kidby, 21 June 1978.
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11. Ibid.
12. Interview with John Goldsmid, 30 April 2008.
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14. F Fenner (ed.). *History of Microbiology in Australia*, pp.532-533.
15. Ibid, p.533.
16. Interview with John Goldsmid, 30 April 2008.
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18. Interview with John Finlay-Jones, 1 May 2008.







*Annual Scientific Meetings are the social highlight of the year, providing a relaxed and easy-going environment, an atmosphere of friendliness and a launching pad for many long friendships, as evidenced by this selection of photographs from meetings over the years.*

Courtesy Dick Groot Obbink, Colleen Allen and David Ellis.