

Chapter Four

Strength from diversity

The ASM's focus on building the microbiology community and providing high quality services to its members saw a number of further advances throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The introduction of paid staff, the employment of professional conference organisers and the purchase of premises for the establishment of a national office facilitated these aims. As the 1990s progressed, the roles and functions of the ASM diversified. Discipline-based Special Interest Groups (SIGs) that had already been formed consolidated and prospered and the ASM was continually called upon to play an advisory role – particularly in the context of policy and regulation. Once again, it was time for change. The National Council had to adapt and evolve if it was to continue to be the voice of microbiology in Australia. Adapt it did. Structural change in the late 1990s saw a new-look National Council emerge – one that could ease the Society into the new millennium and ensure that it could build a strong and dynamic future.

Supporting a profession

Professionalisation touched every aspect of the Australian Society for Microbiology. As well as new membership categories and an enhanced journal, the changes of the mid 1970s resulted in the gradual professionalisation of the administration of the ASM. For many years, Council and the various organising committees of the Annual Scientific Meetings had paid for secretarial and administrative assistance on an *ad hoc* basis. The appointment of a permanent staff member to the ASM was a logical and highly practical step. The rationale was that, with a paid staff member coordinating administrative aspects of the running of the Society, the elected office bearers of National Council would be able to focus on furthering the science of microbiology.¹ The first full-time Executive Officer was employed by the ASM in 1988, joined by a secretary and a word processor operator the following year.

The purchase of its own premises went hand-in-hand with the Society's engagement of paid staff members. In fact, one of the reasons put forward in support of incorporation in the mid 1970s was that it would facilitate both the employment of staff and the acquisition of a viable office space. For many years the Society had been based in Clunies Ross House in Melbourne's Parkville, where it shared office space and secretarial services with a range of other societies. As the Society's activities expanded and its staffing needs increased, it gradually leased more building space. But the ASM was eager to acquire real estate of its own. In 1993 the Society purchased an office in Commercial Road, Melbourne. A permanent national office of the ASM was finally established. While Presidents, Secretaries, Treasurers and state representatives were still scattered around Australia, all paid staff of the ASM – continuing to grow in number – now had a base. All communication with office bearers and for the Society's day-to-day business could now come through the national office in Melbourne. In a sense it was a subtle change. But there was now a centralised contact point for all ASM business, including correspondence regarding *Microbiology Australia*, membership renewal, National Council communication, industry sponsorship and general enquiries.



A permanent national office for the Society was finally established when the ASM purchased building space in Commercial Road, Melbourne in 1993.

A functioning centralised office space, complete with a growing body of staff, which by the early 1990s had expanded to five, was critical for the ASM if it was



to be able to sustain its continually expanding roles. However, there was one aspect of the ASM's core activities that was yet to undergo professionalisation.

For almost 30 years, the Society's Annual Scientific Meetings had been held at low cost venues such as universities, with little or no charge to the Society for use of the facilities. Students, academics, researchers and clinicians alike could feasibly attend meetings as costs were relatively low. The opportunity to meet and share the latest scientific research as well as socialise and network with colleagues was eagerly anticipated and enjoyed by members. But as the Society grew in number and the scientific program began to diversify

to include concurrent sessions and programs for Special Interest Groups, holding the Annual Meetings at university venues became less viable. They simply were not big enough.

Out of necessity, towards the end of the 1980s, the Annual Scientific Meetings underwent a major transformation. For the first time, the 1989 meeting, scheduled for Adelaide, was held in a convention centre. In subsequent years, meetings were held at Jupiters on the Gold Coast and the Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre at Darling Harbour. These larger venues that were specifically designed for conferences meant that greater numbers could be accommodated and the facilities were more flexible. While the cost of attending the meetings increased, the new venues reflected the growing diversity of the Society and added a more professional feel.

At around the same time that the Annual Scientific Meetings moved from university venues to conference centres, the Society employed, for the first time, a professional conference organiser to help manage the registration process for the Annual Meeting. The workload for organising meetings had previously fallen on the voluntary labour of individuals on local organising committees which rotated amongst the states. But, as meetings grew, the organisation of such a major event became too onerous for voluntary and often time-poor members. Employing outside assistance to help with the increasing workload was a logical move, according to John Finlay-Jones:

... the more one engaged professionals to cover what are often very time intensive things like running a secretariat for a conference, doing bookings, interfacing with convention centres, sorting out registrations, accommodation, all that sort of stuff; the more you engaged people who knew what they were doing when they did that, then the more the microbiologists could pay attention to the scientific program and the like.²

These two innovations dramatically changed the feel of Scientific Meetings. The move to a convention centre environment with professional conference organisers had an unquestionably positive influence on the conferences. The facilities were better, the scientific program more diverse, and the organisation was placed in the hands of professionals. However, the flip side of this development was that it translated to higher costs for attendees and a less intimate atmosphere. Annual Scientific Meetings had evolved from a scientific gathering with a minimal budget to a highly professional and comprehensive conference with a well developed scientific program – the cost of which was borne by the Society and by attendees.³

The changes to the structure and organisation of the Annual Scientific Meetings divided opinion. Some preferred the 'good old days' of staying in student accommodation in university colleges and using lecture theatres for the conference sessions. However, it became a matter of logistics. With an ever-growing membership it was no longer feasible to immerse attendees in an inclusive scientific program by day and highly anticipated social program by night. The Annual Scientific Meetings simply had to evolve with the Society.

Expenses skyrocketed during the '90s with the move to professional conference venues. Trade displays had been a part of meetings for



For its first 30 years, the Society's Annual Scientific Meetings were small budget affairs, held at universities and other low-cost venues.

over a decade and a good source of financial support for the Society. As costs grew, the ability to raise funds via sponsorship became crucial. Industry support for Annual Scientific Meetings was essential, lowering the costs for the Society and, therefore, for attendees. Funds raised could also be used to help bring out international speakers and to cover particular aspects of the scientific and social program.

Despite criticisms, the professionalisation of Scientific Meetings was highly successful. After several years of engaging professional conference organisers, National Council decided to employ a staff member on an ongoing basis to coordinate the conferences. The decision once again elicited a range of opinions, including questions about the Society's core activities. However, having a member of the national office employed specifically for this job allowed Council



Sponsorship funding became an essential component of meetings with the move to professional conference venues in the 1990s. The trade exhibition is now an important part of meetings, with sophisticated displays from exhibitors.

Courtesy David Ellis.

and other members to focus on the scientific content of meetings and in this way, increased the value of meetings for all involved.

Diversification and the development of SIGs

With new professional membership categories introduced and integrated and a national structure implemented, the Australian Society for Microbiology was in a strong position. Administratively, it was well supported and the National Council was free to focus on the science of microbiology. As the Society matured, the research and clinical interests of its membership diversified. During the 1970s there had been several calls from members to formalise some of the standing committees of what was then the Federal Council. Fearful that giving these sub-groups too much independence or autonomy might splinter the Society, the decision was made to leave the committees as they were. However, this decision was revisited in years to come.

Microbiology as a science had developed and broadened as it became an established stand-alone discipline. As it did so, specialisations emerged. Many microbiologists identified with these sub-groupings as much as they did with their discipline as a whole. They referred to themselves as mycologists, immunologists, bacteriologists, parasitologists, to name just a few. One of the main driving roles of the ASM has, since its establishment, been to act as a voice for microbiology in Australia. But, as the science developed, it became necessary for the Society to find an inclusive way of representing the differing voices within the discipline. In addition, it was important for the ASM to acknowledge and foster the development of these research areas without creating divisions within the Society. The establishment of Special Interest Groups (SIGs) was a response to this new challenge.

Special Interest Groups were first introduced soon after incorporation. Their establishment, scope, roles, frame of reference, level of autonomy and relationship with the ASM as a whole were carefully and clearly laid out in the Constitution. The main role of each SIG was:

... to advance the science of its special interests in microbiology or related discipline within the framework of the Society, its Constitution and By-Laws, and in addition to and in cooperation with those activities already maintained by the Society.⁶

There were clear requirements regarding the number of Members required to start a new SIG as well as the SIG's responsibility to Council. It was via these regulations and constitutional requirements that Council walked the fine line of ensuring that SIGs had a voice, but did not counterbalance the aims of the Society as a whole.

The presence of Special Interest Groups was most noticeable at the Annual Scientific Meetings. As well as attending plenary sessions and keynote addresses, attendees were able to select from concurrent programs that were organised around SIGs. The groups were highly successful and grew steadily in number. In 1989 alone, seven new SIGs had been established, taking the total to 16.⁷ Their value to the

planning and scientific program of the Annual Scientific Meetings was noted, and by 1992 there were a total of 21 specialist groups.⁸ Today, SIGs remain a strength of the ASM and there are a total of 23. The ability to sustain this depth and breadth of scientific research is testimony to the development of the ASM and the discipline as a whole. The introduction of Special Interest Groups was also symbolic of the Council's ability to respond to the changing nature of the discipline.

General aims had been sufficient to guide the activities of the Australian Society for Microbiology when it was established in 1959. They directed the Federal and later National Council in their activities. However, in 1989, the Society readdressed its aims in a formal strategic plan. The document confirmed the Society's commitment to being the voice of the discipline in Australia and to furthering the science of microbiology. It also went on to further specify that the Society would actively seek to become the arbiter of professional competence for microbiologists as well as the authoritative voice in public debate that related to microbiology.⁹

A high public and political profile was imperative if these new aims were to be met. The National Council directed much of its effort to ensuring that the ASM and its various activities, SIGs and categories of professional membership were well known and, most importantly, understood, particularly within government.¹⁰ As the 1990s progressed, the ASM became increasingly involved in regulatory committees and bodies. For example, the ASM became active in the National Pathology Accreditation Advisory Council (NPAAC) – the statutory committee that advises the commonwealth, state and territory health ministers on matters relating to the accreditation of pathology laboratories. In addition,

the ASM provided representation on a rotating basis to the Pathology Services Table Committee, which determined the costs of pathology testing through Medicare.¹¹

The Society also played an important role in the National Training Reform Agenda, established by the Hawke and Keating governments. The ASM's role was to assist in the setting of competency-based standards for workplace assessment. While its involvement was important in terms of setting workplace standards, this was also a further way to raise understanding of the roles and training of microbiologists. Another important alignment was with the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies (FASTS), which was essentially a lobby group that represented the interests of scientific societies to government.¹² The Society's representation on committees like these continued to increase. The ASM was working steadily towards the aims outlined in the strategic plan, particularly as the decade, and the century, drew to a close. Its challenge was to continue to represent all of its members and their increasingly diverse research and professional interests.

A new century, a new structure

Balance is important for any large society. The ASM of the late 1990s was, as it is today, both learned and professional. It had made its decision to be so in the mid 1970s when it consciously chose to go down the path of professionalisation. The large expansion that occurred post incorporation made it resoundingly clear that this had been an appropriate and necessary decision. But despite the major changes to the Society over the years, the structure of the National Council remained relatively unchanged. It still comprised a President, Immediate Past President or President Elect, Honorary

Attracting a broad audience

Providing an opportunity for microbiologists across Australia to meet, to discuss their science and to hear about developments in the field, Scientific Meetings have always played an extremely important role in the microbiology community. As well as increasing the visibility of the discipline and the profession, meetings stimulate interest in research and provide opportunities for microbiologists to react scientifically as well as socially.

Particularly in the first few decades of the Society's history, meetings were of enormous importance in gathering people together to share ideas and to work off one other. They provided a chance to

listen to others talk about their science, and collaboration would often develop with the interaction that resulted. As John Pitt acknowledges:

It enabled people ... to get together and to pool their ideas, to bounce off each other, in a way that just isn't possible when you're living in little silos around the country, particularly in a country this size ... where it really is physically very difficult to get together ...⁴

Over the years the Society has had to adapt itself to remain appealing to all types of microbiologists and continue to provide sufficient interest to a diverse group. Working hard to ensure balance and representation, while retaining a

cohesive scientific program, is a challenge the ASM endeavours to meet. According to John Finlay-Jones, this is aided by:

... its ability to create useful scientific meetings that do provide for that heterogeneity of interests, from those that are interested in new discovery and mechanism, through to those that are interested in applying an understanding of microbes, to diagnostic tests, and to get insights into these and so on.⁵

A real feature of ASM meetings today is their ability to bring together the different groups that make up the Society, including virologists, bacteriologists, immunologists, mycologists and parasitologists. And from this diversity comes strength.

Secretary, Honorary Treasurer and representatives from each of the state branches. As the 1990s drew to a close, some began to feel that it was time for this governing structure to be altered to reflect the diversified needs of the Society.

Whispers of concern and dissent were becoming increasingly audible. There was talk of some SIGs breaking away from the ASM and, according to some, the Society did not equally represent the interests of academic and clinical members.¹³ Reassessing the structure of the Society, specifically the National Council, was suggested as a way of redressing this balance and ensuring that the governance of the ASM was able to adapt to changes within the Society. The divisional structure of the American Society for Microbiology was suggested as a possible model for bringing about the delicate balance between giving autonomy and independence to the Special Interest Groups, while ensuring they remained united within the Society.¹⁴



In 1999 a National Scientific Advisory Committee was established as a standing committee of the National Council, with President Elect Lyn Gilbert at the helm. It was at a meeting of this newly-formed committee in 2000 that a restructure of the National Council was discussed in earnest. The suggested restructure was placed on National Council's agenda and a strategic planning meeting was held the following year. Julian Rood, who had spoken out regarding the need to change the structure of the ASM, was asked to make a presentation at the planning meeting regarding the structure of the National Council.



Rood's proposal was dramatic. It did away with the honorary positions of Secretary and Treasurer and replaced them with two Vice Presidents. He argued that the roles traditionally performed by the Secretary and Treasurer were now undertaken by the paid Executive Officer, and were no longer required in their existing form. The scientific profile of the Society was also addressed. The activities of the 1990s and the increased committee representation of this period had raised the profile of clinical microbiologists. But, it was argued, the balance between the representation of clinical and non-clinical interests of the Society had become inequitable. Energy needed to be channelled towards raising the profile of research-based members. The suggestion of two Vice Presidents and the division of their roles would address this issue.

Each Vice President would have specific roles. The Vice President, Corporate Affairs would oversee the financial operation of the Society – investments, accounts, and the coordination of the National Office in Melbourne. The Vice President, Scientific Affairs would be responsible for the National Scientific Advisory Committee (NSAC) and would coordinate the scientific activities of the Society, reporting to Council as appropriate. The divisional model

ASM AFFAIRS

A divisional structure for ASM scientific affairs – a position paper

The following paper has been prepared at the request of ASM President, Professor Lyn Gilbert, as a result of the discussions held at the National Scientific Advisory Committee (NSAC) and Strategic Planning meetings held in Adelaide in February 2001.

The document was subsequently modified in response to comments made by National Council and NSAC members and several State branches. However, it has not been approved by National Council and therefore still represents the personal viewpoint of the author. It is intended as a discussion paper, not as a definitive or prescriptive document.

In preparing it I have made the following assumptions:

- that representation on National Council will remain State-based;
- that the position of Secretary will be replaced by that of Vice-President (Scientific Affairs);
- that the ASM is committed to increasing its input into national issues affecting basic and applied biological and

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medical research, including funding:

- that the ASM is committed to implementing a national approach to the formulation of the scientific programme of the Annual Scientific Meeting; and
- that the ASM is committed to the funding of smaller satellite meetings as well as the Annual Scientific Meeting.

Proposed divisional structure

The following divisional structure is loosely based upon the divisional structure of the American Society for Microbiology but takes into account the current ASM SIG structure. For structural reasons related to limiting the size of NSAC, it is not practical to have more than four

divisions. No significant change is envisaged in the role of SIGs, except that they will input into the Annual Scientific Meeting via NSAC rather than Local Organising Committees (LOC) and will report on their activities to NSAC rather than National Council.

It is envisaged that many SIGs will have input into more than one division and that the divisions will represent discipline areas rather than an amalgam of SIGs. That is, it will be the responsibility of the divisional representatives on NSAC to represent disciplines not covered by an active SIG.

Note that the distribution of SIGs into the divisions is not even, because the divisions represent major research fields in microbiology rather than the current, more applied SIG structure (Table 1). For example, there is currently no medical microbiology SIG and all of virology is represented by a single SIG.

Division 1: Medical & Veterinary Microbiology
Discipline areas: Clinical microbiology, diagnostic microbiology, medical mycology, public health microbiology, antimicrobial chemotherapy, veterinary microbiology. Current SIGs: Mycobacteria, mycology, mycoplasmales, ocular microbiology, parasitology and tropical medicine, public health microbiology, serology, veterinary microbiology, women's and children's microbiology.
Division 2: Virology
Discipline areas: Medical virology, molecular virology, biology of human, animal and plant viruses, viral vaccines. Current SIGs: Virology.
Division 3: General, Applied and Environmental Microbiology
Discipline areas: General microbiology, microbial systematics, microbiology education, microbial ecology, environmental microbiology, food microbiology, industrial microbiology, eukaryotic microorganisms. Current SIGs: Water microbiology, computers, cosmetics and pharmaceuticals, culture collections, culture media, education, food microbiology, laboratory management, microbial ecology, probiotic and gut microbiology, students, rapid methods.
Division 4: Bacterial Genetics, Physiology and Pathogenesis
Discipline areas: Microbial genetics, molecular biology, bacteriophages, biotechnology, microbial physiology, bacterial pathogenesis, bacterial host-pathogen interactions, bacterial vaccines. Current SIGs: Molecular microbiology, microbial physiology.

MICROBIOLOGY AUSTRALIA • JULY 2001

It was at a meeting of the National Scientific Advisory Committee, headed by Lyn Gilbert, that a restructure of the National Council was first discussed in 2000.

Julian Rood's position paper proposing a radical restructure of National Council, published in Microbiology Australia in 2001, led the Society into a new phase.

of the American Society was suggested. NSAC would comprise representatives from four divisions that represented different areas of research and professional importance within the ASM.

National Council came out in support of the proposed restructure. In July 2001 Rood's proposal was published in *Microbiology Australia* under the heading *A Divisional Structure for ASM Scientific Affairs: A Position Paper*. It stated:

The following paper has been prepared at the request of ASM President, Professor Lyn Gilbert, as the result of discussions held at the National Scientific Advisory Committee (NSAC) and strategic planning meetings held in Adelaide in February 2001. It was subsequently modified in response to comments made by Council, but has not been approved by Council, therefore still represents the personal viewpoint of the author. It is intended as a discussion paper, not as a definitive or prescriptive document.¹⁵

The article invited feedback and comment. If there was general agreement and support for the restructure, the proposal would be put to all members at an Extraordinary General Meeting of the Society. In 2001 a vote was held and the proposal was accepted. The ASM would continue its way into the new century with a structure that was specifically designed to represent its broadened interests and diversified roles.

ASM today and into the future

The restructure of the ASM and National Council deftly guided the Society into a new phase. It managed to realign and reunite the many voices and various interests that existed within the ASM. It gave new shape, structure and definition to the activities of the ASM. The divisional structure that had been adopted from the American Society translated well to the ASM. Four divisions were established within the NSAC, which was presided over by the Vice President, Scientific Affairs. The divisions represented the specialties that had emerged within the discipline and the Society – medical and veterinary microbiology; virology; general microbiology; and microbial genetics, physiology and pathogenesis. Each division provided three representatives to the NSAC and a system of rotating terms of office ensured both continuity and change.

One of the criticisms of the late 1990s had been that the scientific content of the Annual Scientific Meetings was largely dependent on the interests and areas of expertise of whichever state branch hosted the conference. The changes heralded by the restructure attempted to address this complaint. Divisional representatives to the NSAC became responsible for organising the symposium content at the Annual Scientific Meetings. Divisional chairs would recommend symposium content to NSAC, which would assess

and approve before passing proposals on to the local organising committee. There was initially some resistance from the state-based organising committees to this higher level of National Council input.¹⁶ However, due to the number of sub-specialties represented on NSAC and the constant rotation of divisional representatives, a balanced program was achieved, to the benefit of the ASM members, the scientific content of meetings and the standing of the ASM internationally.

The rapid development of the discipline of microbiology in the latter part of last century had a major impact on the Society. Its membership grew and the areas of expertise of the membership diversified. Committed to remaining the voice of microbiology in Australia as well as the representative voice of microbiologists across the country, the Society adapted its structure to accommodate the multiplicity of voices and perspectives coming from within. The current structure underpins the activities of the Society today. It has shaped the organisation and administration of the Society, the way the content of Annual Scientific Meetings is decided upon, and the Society's ability to respond to external issues of various natures. In addition, the structure has enabled the Society to retain elements of its defining character that stretch back to the late 1950s, while allowing it to adapt and change with the science of microbiology.

Showcasing Australian microbiology

A wonderful opportunity to place Australia on the world microbiology stage came in 1999 when the ASM hosted the Congress of the International Union of Microbiological Societies (IUMS). Held in Sydney over a two-week period in August 1999, this was the first international conference hosted by ASM and it was a major undertaking for the comparatively small Australian Society. Even winning the right to host the Congress was an enormous achievement. Preparations had begun seven years earlier with bid documentation that included not only the Society's ability to run a Scientific Meeting of this scale, but evidence of competitive features, like the facilities in Sydney and Australia's accessibility to travellers from the northern hemisphere.

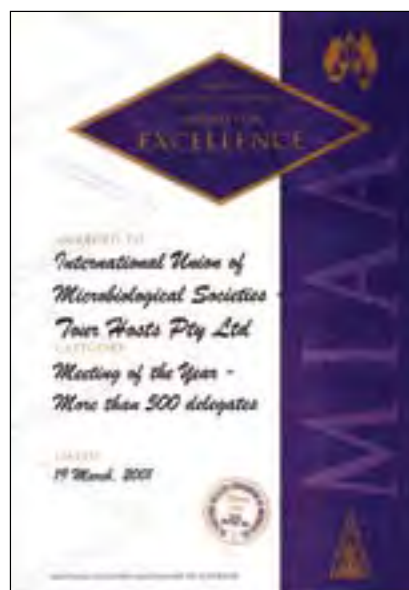
The 1999 Sydney IUMS Congress was the first in the southern hemisphere and the first time the International Congresses of Bacteriology and Applied Microbiology and Mycology, and the International Congress of Virology were

held back-to-back over a two-week period. During the Congress, a first-class scientific program of keynote addresses, plenaries, symposia, workshops, hundreds of invited and offered papers sessions and thousands of poster presentations was staged, as well as receptions, tours and a wide array of social events as part of a busy social program. Over 1,400 delegates attended the Virology Congress and a further 781 for the combined Congresses of Bacteriology and Applied Microbiology and Mycology. Additional speakers, accompanying persons and exhibitors were also in attendance, with the largest delegations coming from the USA, Japan, Germany and the UK.

With the Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre at Darling Harbour as a venue, the picturesque waterfront location offered tempting diversions to delegates. The Australian hosts were praised as 'delightfully friendly and hospitable', hosting 'Australiana nights' with Aussie food and wine and

entertainment including whip cracking and sheep shearing demonstrations. International visitors were impressed by the friendliness and goodwill extended by their Australian hosts. The Society for General Microbiology reported in their magazine that 'every effort was made by the organisers to provide a memorable time for the delegates, both scientifically and socially'.¹⁷

While much of the scientific organisation of the meeting was done by external chairs and members of IUMS, this was a considerable endeavour for the Society that required enthusiasm, energy and commitment. John Mackenzie, overall chair for the scientific organising committee, worked tirelessly for many years to ensure the Congress was a success, as did Dick Groot Obbink and teams of other volunteers. Those efforts, together with careful insertion of local content, ensured that the IUMS Congress was remarkably successful in showcasing the work of Australian microbiologists and their contribution to world microbiology.



The 1990 IUMS Congress was a wonderful opportunity to place Australia on the world microbiology stage. Held at Sydney's picturesque Darling Harbour, the success of the event was due in no small part to the tireless work of ASM members such as John Mackenzie and Dick Groot Obbink.

Courtesy Adolph Basser Library, Australian Academy of Science and Dick Groot Obbink.

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