

Beyond 2005: Reflections and a View to the Future

Membership – an Identity Challenge

Phillip Nagley considers that, "One missed opportunity is our failure to capture the vast majority of biochemists and molecular biologists who use the technologies and think in the same way that the members do in terms of science and how they approach it. But these people might be active in other societies where the tools of our discipline are used. And it's a reflection of the strength and weakness of the fact that biochemistry and molecular biology are so generally applicable to all general areas of biology and beyond. We've had a fairly static membership of about 1200 ordinary members and it's a pity we haven't been able to capitalise on these other people and actually have them as members of the Society." Liz Dennis agrees, "There's the basic conflict if people want specialist or if they want generalist. And biochemistry and molecular biology has got so big that you can't follow everything. Whereas in the 'olden days', everything was more relevant to you. This is the biggest issue facing the Society, and I think we've succeeded – how to make the meetings general enough that a wide range of people can be interested, yet still satisfy the specialists."

ASBMB Meetings – the Highlight of the Year

The Society meeting proves to be the highlight of the year for many Australian biochemists and molecular biologists. John Wallace comments, "I've been to 40-something Society meetings, I wouldn't miss them for anything. I think they're incredibly important for us as academics to keep up to date with what's going on in other fields outside what we can possibly read about in the time available. To get it so nicely summarised for you by experts like Sir Philip Cohen is really great." Edith Lees adds, "I have always attended the meeting as a matter of routine. It enables you, in a few days, to hear at least a reasonable range of lectures of major areas where you can learn in 50 minutes more than you can learn in a month searching the literature yourself. It worries me very much to see young people, particularly graduate students, only going to meetings which are small and very specialised, and there's a tendency for people to go round in circles and patting each other on the back." Bill Elliott declares, "I've enjoyed every one that I've been to, there's been a steady, almost exponential improvement. I personally think that the ASBMB meetings are as good as anything that exists anywhere in the world. They've also got a flavour about them which is rather nice. Not only do you learn the material on the various themes, you learn what the important fields are and what are developing. In this way the meetings are invaluable not only for research workers but also in the educational field for lecturers, writers of educational publications and advanced students." Nick Hoogenraad remarks, "We as scientists swim in a very small pond and we can't ignore the importance of networking and keeping in contact with our colleagues. They after all finish up judging our grants and deciding on our future. And we catch up with people who we were educated with and have gone in a different direction or have taken on employment in a different area. So I think the meetings have a very important social role to play."



Yarra River,
Melbourne.

Meeting Locations

Location has always played an important role in adding to the flavour of Society meetings. In 1989, Treasurer Bob Blakeley noted that three conferences in the early 1980s were successful, largely due to their location in Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne. He observed that a large number of members would attend only if they could drive to the conference from their home city. This is less the case nowadays, with air travel around Australia being relatively cheap and convenient. Previously, meetings in Western Australia were a risk for the Society in terms of lower registration numbers; however, this was disproved at ComBio2004. With an innovative offer of free registration for student members, this meeting attracted 898 participants. John de Jersey observes, "From a personal point of view, the fact that the Society rotates its meetings around the capital cities means that you can go and see the country – you get a flavour for Australia. And each city which puts it on has a local organising committee, it gets that group of people together, gives them an opportunity to invite a substantial number of visitors, which is a good experience."



Involvement and the Next Generation

John de Jersey notes, "Over the years there's been an enormous number of people that have impressed me, and when people have been asked to contribute to the Society, very good people have accepted that challenge. It's important that the Society has gained the respect of the professionals, the senior people in biochemistry and molecular biology areas both in universities and elsewhere. So we've always had a string of good people who've contributed in various ways." And the Society rewards its high-achieving members – there are two Medals, two Awards and at least four Fellowship offered annually (see ASBMB Medallist, Awardee and Fellowship Profiles in this issue).

But with so many demands today, it is a continuing challenge for enthusiastic members to find the time to take on societal responsibilities. Philip Kuchel comments, "Involvement – it's almost a cultural thing, leaving a little bit of your timetable for the social good. We have personal management and development interviews for academic staff, but you almost need to inculcate the spirit amongst students. The pressures of research are much greater now. My view is that every member of a biochemistry discipline should be a member of ASBMB. In the days when I was an Honours student and PhD student, it was just an automatic part of being a biochemist." Phillip Nagley notes, "We are not engaging our younger members to retain their membership. We make the first year of a PhD student's membership free, as long as the supervisor is a member, but I wonder if we could even have more specific inducements through engaging activities for Honours students or even third year students – it would be nice if we could get loyalty early."



Building Bridges for the Future

The ComBio concept has been a powerful driving force throughout the past decade, and some members feel that this model could be further harnessed in the future.



John de Jersey articulates, "Perhaps forming a federation-type meeting is a good way forward, because the disciplines are coming together. From a university point of view, the departments are becoming schools of related disciplines. We want to recognise the strengths of interdisciplinary areas, in maintaining a focus, building relationships and co-meeting with various societies." David Hume agrees, "What's missing in Australian broad bioscience is a Federation of Australian Societies for Experimental Biology like in America. It would hold meetings and organise different society groupings to try to get them to synergise. They could then get together to use bigger venues and attract greater numbers of international speakers with interests that bridge all of the societies."

"Research in all of the life sciences has become dominated by molecular biology in a quest for mechanistic explanations for biological phenomena. You, like me, probably ask yourself, 'Am I a biochemist, a molecular biologist, a protein chemist, a cell biologist or a developmental biologist?'... The incredible information coming out of genome sequencing programs and the accompanying marriage between electronics and molecular biology provides us with the basis of the living process. These changes present your Society with a major challenge. Can a single society such as ASBMB meet the diverse needs of biologists interested in mechanistic explanations or are we better served by a plethora of smaller societies with more specialised interests? How many societies can a small scientific community such as ours realistically support? How many local meetings can we afford to attend? I suspect that there are widely divergent points of view on this, but my own view is that there are major advantages to having a large and strong Society."

Nick Hoogenraad, 1998 President's Report

"Biochemistry and molecular biology and cognate sciences (such as genetics, cell and developmental biology) continue to grow in importance on the world scene as the biotechnology revolution gathers momentum. There are also encouraging signs that chemistry is making a comeback, especially in biological chemistry and biomaterials, and that the central role of mathematics in biology (computational biology) is being recognised. To some extent, these developments are being reflected in Australia – our sciences are no longer esoteric and largely removed from the interests of the community. Hardly a day passes without reports in the popular press and television news of breakthroughs in medicine or agriculture made possible by genomics and molecular cell biology."

John de Jersey, 2001 President's Report



"The opening sentence of this penetrating historical overview of our Society uses the phrase 'ever-changing world'. This phrase really captures the rapidly evolving scientific and technological environment in which biochemists and molecular biologists undertake their education, training and work. Can we imagine how the founders of ABS would marvel at the content of the scientific presentations at ComBio meetings today – how they would contemplate the sophisticated techniques used by postgraduate students in the research work presented in their posters or talks? We are surely in the debt of those whose vision and efforts led to the founding of our Society in 1955. They not only provided a continuing forum for such significant scientific discourse in Australia but they also generated a social and professional context for the development of biochemistry and molecular biology in this country. I hope that our efforts today will be reflected on as positively in 2055 – and we can only wonder what technical developments and scientific insights our successors will be talking about in 50 years' time."

Phillip Nagley, President 2005