

Brief ASCEPT History

The Beginning: the Australasian Society for Clinical and Experimental Pharmacologists (ASCEP)

There was a recognition in the mid-1960s that it was time for Pharmacology to have a more identifiable and exclusive image than it had hitherto enjoyed. Up to this time, there were almost no separate academic departments of Pharmacology in Australia and Pharmacology was still seen by many as a sub discipline of Physiology. To this end, a small group, known as the Steering Committee, met formally in November 1966 to discuss the formation of a society that would have as its primary focus clinical and experimental pharmacology. The Steering Committee consisted of the following: from academia, Professors Garth McQueen (Dunedin) and Robert Whelan (Adelaide), and from the pharmaceutical industry, Drs Kevin Higgins, Ralph Howard, Bernard Lake and Neville Percy. This group must clearly have been very active since within 6 months about 120 people in Australasia expressed an interest in such a society being founded. The Interim Council (the members of the Steering Committee) met in June 1967 and specified the format of the Society's first scientific meeting and annual general meeting. This took place at the Melbourne University Pharmacology Department in November of the same year. The first Council was elected at this meeting and consisted of Professor Robert Whelan (President), Professor Garth McQueen (President-elect), Dr Bernard Lake (Registrar – now renamed Secretary), Professor Michael Rand (Assistant Registrar), Dr Kevin Higgins (Treasurer) and Dr Neville Percy (Assistant Treasurer). The role of these main office bearers has remained unchanged in the last 40 years.

The Memorandum and Articles of Association (Constitution) were formally accepted by the Commonwealth Attorney General's Department in March 1968 and the Society was now a registered entity. At this time, there were 192 members from all Australian States, New Zealand and New Guinea. Members were welcomed, not only from traditional Pharmacology but also from related disciplines, with the sole proviso that they should be interested in some aspect of Pharmacology, since the first Council recognised that people who called themselves Pharmacologists often came from disparate disciplines.

Some of the main objectives of ASCEP enunciated in the Memorandum and Articles of Association were as follows: to promote and advance the study and application of Pharmacology and Toxicology in all its aspects; to promote, arrange and conduct meetings and related activities; to publish and print such lectures and proceedings of such meetings; to cultivate and maintain the highest principles of practice and ethics in persons engaged in the sciences of Pharmacology, Toxicology and ancillary sciences; to have a role in advising governments on maintaining optimum standards of drug efficacy and safety and possibly other roles in advising on legislative aspects of drug use. Whilst the scope of Pharmacology in the broader sense has undoubtedly increased in the last 40 years, the original objectives remain essentially unchanged and are still relevant in the 21st century.

The Scientific Meetings, Publication of Proceedings and Prizes

With rare exceptions (generally when the Society joined with other organizations for a joint meeting), the Annual Scientific Meetings have been scheduled to coincide with the end of the academic year. This has been a deliberate Council policy to attract as many students as possible and to ensure that they could present the results of their research that spanned at least a full academic year. The first Scientific Meeting featured 47 papers (all basic pharmacology), delivered orally over 2 days. There were no concurrent sessions. There were also 2 hours of demonstrations.

Because of the inevitable increase in the number of presentations, the duration of meetings has lengthened to 4 days, concurrent sessions were introduced in 1977 and poster sessions were added in 1978. The first symposium (on drug abuse) took place in 1969 and the proceedings of this were published in the *Medical Journal of Australia* in 1970. Symposia have become a regular feature at all subsequent meetings. Workshops were introduced in 1990 and have been the responsibility of the various Sections (see below). The Young Investigator Symposium was first offered in 1989 as a forum for new postdoctoral scientists. It is sponsored by Johnson & Johnson Research and is now an integral part of the Annual Scientific Meeting. Trade exhibits became a regular feature in 1980. Meeting venues for the Annual Scientific Meetings have included all Australian capital cities and several New Zealand centres. In contrast to the first Scientific Meeting in 1966, the 39th Annual Scientific Meeting attracted 250 ASCEPT registrants and featured 186 oral presentations, 232 posters and 32 symposia. These statistics serve as a measure of the maturity of the Society and its importance as the forum for those whose professional practice embraces some aspect of Pharmacology and toxicology.

The Society has always acknowledged the importance of publishing the proceedings of its Scientific Meetings. This task initially fell to the organising committee of the host department, which produced the material in various formats. From 1982 until 1993 proceedings appeared as a supplement to *Clinical and Experimental Pharmacology and Physiology* (the Society's official journal) and thereafter in free-standing proceedings that carry an ISSN number. To reinforce the importance that the Society conferred upon the professional dissemination of the proceedings, Council first appointed ASCEP Proceedings Editors in 1988 and these persons have taken charge of this vital and time consuming activity since then.

Because of the increasing diversification of the Discipline, Council created the position of Scientific Secretary in 1995 and the ASCEPT Scientific Advisory Committee in 2002 to ensure that the content of the Annual Scientific Meeting catered to all members. Members of this Committee represent the major scientific groupings (the Sections) in the Society.

The Society has always strongly valued its student members. As tangible evidence of this, several prizes have been created to encourage and reward

scientific excellence. Council introduced the Neville Percy Prize in 1983; this prize is now awarded to a higher degree student for the best poster presentation. The second prize to be introduced (in 1985) was the Whelan Prize. This is now awarded to an Honours student for the best poster presentation. Since 1985, additional prizes for various categories of presentation were established; the total number of student prizes in 2006 was 9. The prize giving ceremony has become an integral part of the closing ceremony of the annual Scientific Meeting.

Further recognition of the importance of the student membership came about with the provision of student travel grants to assist students to attend the Annual Scientific Meeting. This scheme started in 1989 and remains an important Society initiative. Over the years additional travel grant schemes were established: New Investigator Travel Awards to assist young investigators to attend international conferences, workshops and to gain short term work experience in overseas centres; International Union of Pharmacology/International Union of Toxicology/Clinical Pharmacology and Therapeutics (IUPHAR/IUTOX/CPT) Travel Grants to assist young investigators to attend international congresses of these organizations.

In addition to fostering the student membership, the Society considered it appropriate to honour those of its more senior members who have made outstanding contributions to the Society and to Australasian Pharmacology. The ASCEPT Lectureship (to honour significant contributions to the development of Pharmacology and/or Toxicology) was initiated in 1987 and has become a biennial event at the Annual Scientific Meeting. The Michael Rand Medal (in recognition of the late Michael Rand) was established to honour an ASCEPT member whose research has made an outstanding contribution to the disciplines of Clinical or Experimental Pharmacology or Toxicology. The recipient delivers a lecture and receives a medal at the Annual Scientific Meeting. This has also become a biennial event.

ASCEPT has held joint scientific meetings formally with the Australian Physiological and Pharmacological Society (APPS), the Australian Pharmaceutical Sciences Association (APSA) and as part of the Australian Health and Medical Research Congress.

Governance

Council is the governing body of the Society. Its office bearers have remained essentially unchanged since the Society's foundation. The Society membership elects the Council office bearers and other representatives. As the Society grew, Council became aware that the somewhat disparate groups within the Society should have their own identity, whilst remaining loyal to the Society at large. This resulted in the creation of Interest Groups in 1988. These have been renamed Sections. Each has a convenor, and the New Zealand Section has a voice on Council. In 2006, there were 5 Sections (Experimental; Clinical; Toxicology; Drug Metabolism, Delivery and Pharmacokinetics; Clinical Toxicology). The future and evolution of the Sections require ownership by the membership.

International Links

From the very beginning of the Society, the Australian and New Zealand membership have always worked closely together, despite the geographical separation of the two countries. New Zealand has always been represented on Council. The New Zealand section has been holding its own separate Annual Scientific Meetings since 1975. There have also been four very successful Annual Scientific and Annual General Meetings in New Zealand for the whole Society, the last being held in 2001.

In 1987, ASCEPT hosted the 10th International Congress of Pharmacology in Sydney. This was the first international Congress to be hosted by the Society and required enormous organisation. The Congress president (Michael Rand) and deputy chairman (Denis Wade) organised what was considered to have been one of the most successful IUPHAR meetings ever. There were about 3000 registrants from 62 countries. There was a substantial profit from this meeting; these funds are now used to support the student activities mentioned above. The Society has hosted two additional international congresses: the International Congress of Toxicology in 2001 (ICT9) and the International Congress on Clinical Pharmacology and Therapeutics in 2004 (CPT2004). Both of these meetings were scientifically, socially and financially very successful. In 2007, ASCEPT will host the Southeast Asian Western Pacific Regional Pharmacology meeting in Adelaide. The Society has also jointly sponsored other international meetings: a meeting with the British Pharmacological Society (BPS) in Melbourne in 2000; a joint meeting with the BPS and the Western Pacific Society of Pharmacology in Vancouver in 2001.

There has been a strong link with the BPS for many years. This became formalised in 1979 when the BPS sent to Australia the first BPS lecturer. Since then, this has become an annual event. The visitor presents a plenary lecture at the Annual Scientific Meeting and visits as many centres in Australasia as possible. A reciprocal arrangement, whereby an ASCEPT lecturer visits the BPS, began in 1989. The ASCEPT lecturer visits the UK every second year and the visitor presents a plenary lecture at a BPS scientific meeting. Because of the success of the BPS/ASCEPT lecturer scheme, a similar arrangement was set up with the British Toxicological Society (BTS) in 1996. Discussions to establish formal links between ASCEPT and the Japanese Pharmacological Society began in 2005 and the links with the BPS and BTS remain solid and more strategic with less formal and rigid arrangements.

Toxicology and the name change to ASCEPT

The membership of ASCEP(T) has always included Toxicologists. The concept of a Toxicology subgroup within ASCEP was proposed in 1981 with the aim being "to improve communications between scientists acting in diverse fields and sharing a common interest in Toxicology". The first meeting of the Toxicology Subsection was in 1982. Discussions about the ultimate place of Toxicology within the Society took place over several years and in

1990 the Society voted to add the name "Toxicologists" to the Society's name, thus bringing about a name change that more accurately reflected the Society's membership.

Other functions

Council has always been conscious of the societal role that the Society might fulfil. Two such areas deserve mention. The first was the lobbying activities of the Society in the late 1960s and early 1970s to have Clinical Pharmacology established as a formal discipline in Australian medical schools and as a separate discipline for health delivery. The Society made representations to the Commonwealth Department of Health, the Australian Vice-chancellors Committee and to the Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP). These activities resulted in recognition that Clinical Pharmacology should be an integral part of the medical undergraduate curriculum; the establishment of several National Health and Medical Research Council funded training fellowships for medical graduates to obtain training overseas; and for the RACP to accept Clinical Pharmacology as a dedicated medical specialty and to take charge of training future Clinical Pharmacologists.

The second major initiative was the Society's role in the establishment of the Australian Medicines Handbook (AMH). ASCEPT was at the forefront of lobbying activities in the early 1990s to the Commonwealth Department of Health to obtain funds for the establishment of this initiative. ASCEPT finally joined in a partnership with the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners and the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia to form the governing body for this initiative. The first edition appeared in 1998. It is now an annual publication. The AMH is now considered to be the principal independent source of drug information in Australia and is likely to continue to have a major impact on improving prescribing and enhancing the quality use of medicines.

2006 is the 40th anniversary of the foundation of the Society. The founders of the Society would have been well pleased to see that the original objectives have been vigorously pursued and would have been proud of the many achievements that have occurred.

The author of this brief history is indebted to and wishes to acknowledge Associate Professor G. A. Bentley, who wrote a more substantial history of the Society spanning the years 1966 to 1991.