Editorial

Some personal thoughts on the Australasian Society of Clinical and Experimental Pharmacologists in the 1980s

A B S T R A C T

There were a number of highly significant events regarding ASCEP in the 1980s: a tour of China by ASCEP pharmacologists; the Sydney IUPHAR Congress; and the initiation of the Australasian Visitor to the BPS scheme. ASCEP appointed a professional secretariat, established an investment portfolio, and initiated Special Interest Groups. The Society entered the 1990s welcoming toxicologists into the new ASCEPT.

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The 1980s were a very significant time for the discipline of pharmacology in Australia. ASCEP, the Australasian Society of Clinical and Experimental Pharmacologists as it then was, hosted the highly successful 10th International Congress of IUPHAR, the International Union of Pharmacology, in Sydney in 1987. This congress and associated satellite meetings put Australian pharmacology on the world stage with many overseas pharmacologists visiting Australia for the first time. Although this was undoubtedly the highlight for Australian pharmacology in the 1980s, there were other significant events in the 1980s.

As member of ASCEP since 1971 and a member of council 1977–1983, I was appointed Treasurer 1980–1982. My major task was to put the membership data on computer, an Apple IIe as I remember, and to get the financial records up to date. Bevyn Jarrott followed me as Treasurer and successfully transferred the records to a PC. Together we made a substantial contribution to ASCEP in terms of organization. It wasn’t until 1989 that ASCEP established a professional secretariat at my instigation. I was elected as ASCEP President in 1986 and Bevyn in 1990, when the Society changed its name to incorporate toxicologists and became ASCEPT.

1. First Sino-Australian workshop in pharmacology

In 1984, Mike Rand organised what became known as the First Sino-Australian Workshop in Pharmacology. A group of 19 Australian pharmacologists and some spouses toured China at their own expense, as it opened up to the West after the Cultural Revolution. We presented workshops in Beijing and Shanghai to many eager Chinese pharmacologists. Everywhere we travelled, Mike was treated with great respect and reverence as his textbook with Bill Bowman was obviously well known even behind the Bamboo Curtain. I wrote this event up for Trends in Pharmacological Sciences, in 1985 (Fig. 1).

The workshop was organised under the patronage of the Chinese Academy of Basic Medical Sciences, the Chinese Medical Association and ASCEP. Members of the Australian Delegation visited medical schools and hospitals in Beijing, Shijiazhuang, Guelin, Canton, Fushan and Shanghai. A highlight was a visit to the China-Japan Friendship Hospital in Beijing, a new building complex equipped with the latest in intensive care monitoring and CAT scanning equipment. Of particular interest were the dispensaries, side by side, for ‘Western’ and ‘Traditional’ medicines, and the use of acupuncture therapy in conjunction with ‘Western’ treatment and diagnosis. The hospital in Fushan was housed in much more modest quarters but exhibited the same enthusiastic approach to blending ‘Western’ and ‘Traditional’ medicine.

The Cultural Revolution clearly had a constricting effect on Chinese pharmacological research, effectively cutting off such research for 10 years from 1965. Interestingly, since we were accompanied everywhere by representatives of the Chinese Medical Association, one could not help but speculate that we ‘westerners’ were being policed in the newly liberated China. It was my great pleasure to meet up with Prof Zou Gang at the Shanghai Institute of Materia Medica, who discovered the antagonistic action of bicuculline on certain central inhibitory processes in 1965. He was unable to publish these results until 1976. The GABA antagonistic action of bicuculline was discovered in Australia in 1970 and thus the Cultural Revolution effectively held up progress in GABA pharmacology for some 5 years.

This tour of China by Australian pharmacologists also served to bring us together and helped us to cooperate effectively for the big task of hosting the IUPHAR Congress.
2. IUPHAR Congress

In 1987 as described by Geoff Bentley in his excellent Brief History of ASCEPT 1966–1991 as “undoubtedly the most extensive and exciting activity in its history when it acted as host to the Tenth International Congress of Pharmacology, held in Sydney between 23rd and 28th August”. Mike Rand and his colleagues had made a highly professional and successful bid on behalf of ASCEPT at the 8th IUPHAR Congress in Tokyo in 1981. As Geoff noted, “An event of this size and importance involved a great deal of work by pharmacologists from all over Australia, and especially in the host city”.

The National Organising Committee was soon established with Mike Rand as Chairman and Denis Wade as Deputy Chairman. I was appointed as Co-Chairman of the Scientific Program Committee and Beyn Jarrott was its secretary. Along with several other Australians, I was a delegate to the IUPHAR General Assembly at the 9th IUPHAR Congress in London in 1984, where we discussed arrangements for the Sydney meeting.

The logistics for holding the IUPHAR Congress in Sydney were considerable. We were fortunate in appointing very professional conference organisers. Ngaita Bishop and her team did a wonderful job (and I employed her again for the International Society for Neurochemistry meeting in Sydney in 1991). At that time, there was no suitable convention centre for such a meeting, but there was the iconic Sydney Opera House. Due to costs and prior bookings we could only use the Opera House in the mornings except for the opening ceremony. For the afternoons and evenings, we moved to the centre of Sydney using the Hilton, Sheraton-Wentworth and Intercontinental Hotels and the Centrepoint complex. These arrangements, suggested and facilitated by John Shaw, worked remarkably well. The more than 3000 registrants reported few problems and greatly enjoyed their time at the congress. They came from 62 countries, with more than 500 each from the USA and Japan, 457 from Australia and 250 from the UK.

The opening ceremony in the Concert Hall of the Sydney Opera House was a special occasion, with most of the 2700 seats occupied on the Sunday afternoon. I sat on the stage with the official party and enjoyed the speeches by Mike Rand and the Federal Minister of Science, Barry Jones, and a concert by the Australian Youth Orchestra. The scientific sessions started the next day. As reported by Geoff Bentley, “Over the five days of scientific sessions, there were 1537 poster and 471 oral presentations, 175 symposia and 20 plenary sessions, as well as three half-day symposia on computer-aided problem solving in teaching, research and clinical pharmacology respectively. As many as ten concurrent sessions were frequently held and so, as with most large meetings, it was never possible to attend more than a small fraction of the offerings, especially as they were scattered about the city”.

Beyn and I encountered very few problems with the scientific program as we consulted all National Societies that made up IUPHAR for them to nominate outstanding pharmacologists from their society as potential plenary lecturers and invited symposia. The suggestions were entered into a comprehensive database and ranked to assist the final choice of speakers in consultation with the IUPHAR Advisory committee who visited Sydney in 1985. I led the Australian Delegation of the IUPHAR General Assembly during the meeting where we were congratulated on the outstanding success of the Congress. Being involved in this relatively large pharmacology conference stood me in good stead for when I later became the Australian representative on the Organising Committee for the Pacifichem meetings in Hawaii. These meetings attracted more than 12,000 registrants and more than 70 concurrent sessions.

There was a special issue of Trends in Pharmacological Sciences in July 1987 for the IUPHAR Congress with many contributions by Australian pharmacologists. Mike Rand wrote an excellent article called ‘Pharmacology down under’ covering the outstanding pharmacological work carried out in Australia. Mike was elected for a second term as ASCEPT President in 1987, a well-deserved and unique honour. He was President previously in 1973 (Fig. 2).

The proceedings of the IUPHAR Congress were subsequently published in a book edited by Mike Rand and Colin Raper.

The Sydney IUPHAR Congress was also a financial success such that ASCEPT was able to contribute substantial funds to the Amsterdam IUPHAR Congress in 1990 and also provide ASCEPT with a significant boost to its finances. In fact, the financial return from the Congress allowed ASCEPT to establish an investment portfolio, which continues to support the Society in the pursuit of its mission.

3. Australasian visitor to the BPS

Since 1979, the British Pharmacological Society had provided a visitor to the ASCEPT annual scientific meeting. Each year the BPS Council selects a leading research pharmacologist to attend the following ASCEPT meeting. The first visitor was Rod Flower who gave
a plenary lecture on “Lipid mediators and their control by anti-inflammatory drugs”. These visitors have included both basic and clinical pharmacologists and toxicologists. They visit many pharmacology departments in Australian and New Zealand as well as giving a plenary lecture at the ASCEP annual scientific meeting.

As a result of the financial success of the Sydney IUPHAR meeting, ASCEP set up a reciprocal arrangement to sponsor a visitor to the BPS. I was honoured to be the Inaugural Australasian Visiting Lecturer to the British Pharmacological Society in 1989. I gave a plenary lecture at the BPS meeting in Bristol on “GABA receptors, as simple as ABC?”. I spent three weeks in England and Scotland visiting colleagues in eight universities (University College London, the London School of Pharmacy, Bristol, Cambridge, Dundee, Edinburgh and Oxford Universities, and the University of St Andrews), three Medical Research Council Units (the Anatomical Neuropharmacological Unit in Oxford, the Molecular Neurobiological Unit in Cambridge and the Brain Metabolism Unit in Edinburgh) and five industrial research establishments (the Sandoz Institute for Medical Research in London, the Reckitt & Colman Psychopharmacology Unit in Bristol, the Parke-Davis Research Unit in Cambridge, Drug Development (Scotland) Ltd at Dundee and the Merck Sharp & Dohme Neuroscience Research Centre at Terlings Park). I attended two conferences – the Bristol BPS meeting and the SKF Symposium on Ion Channels at Cambridge, the latter as the guest of SKF (at the beginning of this symposium Tim Rink’s opening remarks were modified
to include some details on the SKF-Beecham merger announced in the morning papers!). I gave eight lectures, the most enjoyable of which was to pharmacology honours students from Edinburgh at their ‘retreat’ on Loch Tay. I had enjoyed most excellent hospitality, and was particularly well versed about the consumption of Australian wine in Britain and about how the Australian cricket team was going to be humbled on their forthcoming English tour! (Australia went in as underdogs but won 4-0!)

The Australasian Visitor scheme to the BPS continues to be very successful. There is now a BPS/ASCEPT Outstanding Young Investigator Prize. This prize is awarded at the ASCEPT Annual Scientific Meeting and provides an opportunity for the awardee to spend up to three weeks visiting research laboratories in the UK and attend the BPS scientific meeting. I am on the judging panel to select the winner for the 2016 award.

4. Other matters

I mentioned earlier the appointment of professional secretariat for ASCEPT. Another important initiative was the formation of Special Interest Groups or SIGs. These continue to this day proving to be a very useful way to focus interest in specific aspects of pharmacology and toxicology. They possibly represent the most important thing I did for ASCEPT!

I have been privileged to enjoy the many benefits of ASCEPT membership, especially the sense of collegiality and the friendliness of the annual meetings. I was honoured to receive the inaugural Michael Rand medal in 1993 and an ASCEPT Achievement Award in 2008 for my service to Australasian pharmacology. I was made a Life member in 2010. It continues to be a pleasure to serve such a marvellous society. My only regret is not having joined ASCEPT earlier.

Conflict of interest

I have no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Philip Beart, Bevyn Jarrott, Dominic Geraghty, Tina Hinton and Helen Johnston for their helpful comments.

Sources


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6 December 2016
Available online 23 December 2016