

PERSPECTIVE

## Read's recall: shuffling abstracts - and foundations

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My first involvement with the ESHG was in 1993 when I was invited to speak at the Barcelona meeting. At that time, like all too many British geneticists, I had a thoroughly transatlantic mindset. I regarded the American Society of Human Genetics as the main foreign society whose meetings I might attend. My main overseas contacts and collaborations were with Americans and, outside my immediate research area, I had little real appreciation of the European human genetics scene. That changed when, a couple of years later, Charles Buys invited me to join the SPC. Working with this set of people from a dozen different European countries changed my perspective. Without downgrading or denigrating my many American friends, at last I felt like a European (in the light of the Brexit madness, European colleagues are allowed a smile).

When Charles retired from the chairmanship, he asked me to take over. This was quite a daunting challenge. Almost any other of the society's activities could survive an occasional failure, but if the SPC failed to deliver a good conference programme, it would be catastrophic. It was an immense privilege, as well as a big responsibility, to chair this thoroughly international and multidisciplinary group and to see busy senior scientists and clinicians contributing their time and expertise freely and willingly. Although the conferences were smaller than at present, it was still a lot of work to organise the programme of invited speakers, review submitted abstracts, select ones suitable for oral presentation and organise those into coherent sessions.

One worry was what to do with poor quality abstracts. A main aim of the Society was to foster growth of a European human genetics community. This meant that people from less developed countries should be encouraged to attend, and for many of them that would not be possible unless they had an abstract accepted. At the same time, it was important not to lower the scientific level of the meeting by filling it with poor quality posters. In the intervening years, rising standards overall and the introduction of the electronic – only category for abstracts have made this less of a pressing problem. Our general policy was to be kind to people from countries where research was difficult, provided their abstract did report at least some data and was neither incorrect, unethical nor mad. A particular problem was abstracts reporting highly significant associations of a disease with some or other polymorphism, based on very small numbers. As long as the statistics were correctly calculated from the data presented, it would have been difficult to reject an abstract based on a gut feeling – or maybe just a prejudice – that such a significant effect was implausible. I remember discussing this with my counterpart at the ASHG. It was a perennial problem.

During my time, the selections were made by shuffling printouts of high-scoring abstracts. I have fond memories of Jerome and his staff manfully producing piles of printouts on colour-coded paper so that the different subspecialties could keep track of their part of the process. With the VMA staff, one felt oneself in safe hands – unlike the

situation that arose with a previous conference organiser when reviewing the proofs of the abstract book before the main print run, and I discovered that they had tidily rearranged every author list of every abstract into alphabetical order: no more first authorships unless you were A Abrahamson, and no more last authorships unless you were Z Zybalski!

After the 2003 meeting, I was able, with much relief, to hand over to Han Brunner who, of course, took the SPC from strength to strength – but then my involvement continued both as Treasurer and as chair of the Annual Meetings Committee. Neither of these jobs was a demanding as chairing the SPC. In the past, the AMC would receive bids from national societies and make decisions based on scientific and political judgements. But with the increasing size and professionalisation of the annual meeting, the role of that committee inevitably shrank. Only a limited number of conference centres could meet our requirements at a price we could afford. Many conference centres had attractive lecture halls, but not the 10 000 m<sup>2</sup> hall for the exhibition and posters – and it was important to keep these in a single space to make sure the exhibitors, whose role was critical for our finances, did not feel isolated. Meanwhile, the sort of centres that catered for trade fairs could provide the big halls but not the lecture rooms. Those could always be built in one of the halls, but that is a very expensive option. Checking the physical facilities and negotiating financial details is a job for professionals. It is important that there should be democratic oversight and that decisions about where to hold our meetings should not rest wholly with our professional advisers, but our long-standing relationships with Jerome and his team, and with Jantie de Roos and Rose International mean there is a large degree of mutual trust and understanding. Thus, the business of the AMC now mainly takes place during meetings of the Executive. We still retain the option of making site visits, but there is no point in the amateurs of the AMC second-guessing the judgements of our professionals.

My time as Treasurer has been fairly free of difficult decisions because of the generally healthy state of our finances and the self-discipline of the SPC in not proposing recklessly expensive programmes. The main task has been to keep track of our rather complicated finances. These involve four countries each year: for historical reasons, the ESHG is formally incorporated in Belgium, while our administration is in Austria, and our reserves are held in a charitable foundation in The Netherlands and the annual meeting is usually in a fourth country. In addition, we depend on income from the journal, which until this year has been based in the UK and reported in sterling. Because of these complications, it would be ruinously expensive to have our accounts formally audited by an outside company. It was a relief when recently the Executive implemented a long-overdue system of requiring multiple signatures for payments, and appointed two society members as auditors to check my calculations.

Over all these years of varying involvement with the ESHG, I reflect how fortunate we have been. Through general common sense and goodwill, and maybe a degree of luck, we have avoided all the quarrels and personality problems that can so easily

poison the atmosphere of a society. I cannot recall a single really contentious discussion in the SPC or Executive. How nice if the issue of the *EJHG* celebrating our one hundredth birthday can still say the same!



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