
President's Report
to the 21st Annual Meeting of the ANZSCDBI (ComBio02)
Sydney, September 29th-October 3rd, 2002.



The Society has had an eventful past 12 months. We have been very proactive in the embryonic stem cell debate that has been before Federal Parliament. In addition to the usual support of our representative government lobbying groups, ASMR (the Australian Society for Medical Research) and FASTS (the Federation of Scientific and Technological Societies), the Society pledged its support as a co-founding member to a new lobbying body, CAMRA (the Coalition for the Advancement of Medical Research Australia). Other members of CAMRA include patient support groups, Institutions involved in ES cell work and other societies and Trusts whose interests pertain to, or might be positively impacted by, this area of research. CAMRA was established as the debate began to hot up over the use of excess IVF embryos for collection of, and research into, human embryonic stems. Their activities have included submission of letters to Ministers and numerous delegations to Federal Parliament for face-to-face meetings leading up to the Parliamentary conscience vote on the Research Involving Embryos (RIE) Bill 2002. The Society also made independent submissions to the Prime Minister, the Ministers for Health and Ageing and Education, Science and Training respectively, as well as to the Joint Senate Committee on the RIE Bill. ASMR and FASTS have also continued to actively lobby the Government on additional political issues for which the Society has offered its full support. Such issues have included the National Research Priorities and the urgent need to address the alarming decline in R&D investment – as we plunge further below the OECD average. However, we still have a long, long way to go - especially if the 2002 expectations of ~18% of NHMRC project grant applications being funded does pan out! In regard to these other political matters, the Society would like to extend its thanks to Melissa Little for taking on the position of Biological Sciences representative on the FASTS Board. I don't think we could have anyone better in that position to convey the needs and interests of our members.

The Executive has again worked hard on retaining and attracting members to the Society as well as reversing the trend of past years of a declining corporate support base. So, it gives me great pleasure in reporting another increase in numbers for 2002, with membership now standing at 238 at the time of writing of this report – up from 153 at the start of this Executive's term two years ago. This figure is still lower than our target set at the beginning of 2002 but nevertheless satisfying. It is unknown yet whether it is the increase in member benefits, such as the growing list of member discounts on journal subscriptions, or simply the persistence of the Executive that has facilitated this! Additional initiatives have been put in motion to target new membership in States with a currently poor representation relative to their research strength and output in this field. Concomitant with the increase in ordinary and student member numbers has been the significant increase in corporate sponsorship - from 4 in 2001 to 14 in 2002 as a result of the change in the corporate package offered by the Society and the persistence of the Treasurer, Blair Hopwood. The associated increased revenue goes a long way to supporting many of the Society's activities. Added to this have been the financial bonuses stemming from the highly successful combined biological societies meeting (ComBio) format. Over and above the benefits to the scientific program associated with the increased expenditure on quality international speakers, the Society each year receives a proportion of the profits commensurate with the proportion of member registrants (which surprisingly has been constant or down since the last independent Society conference in 1998). Regardless, the Society is maintaining its commitment to the ComBio format until 2006, with the only foreseeable conflict being the hosting of the International Developmental Biology Congress in Sydney in 2005.

The healthy state of the Society's finances inherited by this Executive can in part be attributed to increased conference revenue in prior years. This, in conjunction with the excellent ordinary and corporate membership numbers, has facilitated development of a handful of new initiatives as well as maintenance of existing

programs. Amongst these are the student travel awards set up to enable attendance at the national meeting [nine awards given this year: WA (2), SA (3), VIC (2), QLD (1), NZ (1)], provision of student awards at the local Combined Biological Sciences meeting in Perth and the Hunter Cell Biology meeting, and continuation of the Society's Current Topics program. This program, successfully launched by the previous Executive, has proven immensely popular, fostering the organization and running of numerous specialist workshops and national meetings pertinent to our member interests each year. I feel that these workshops and meetings to some degree counteract the few negatives associated with the larger ComBio format, eg loss of intimacy.

The Society newsletter has continued to be a useful forum for dissemination of news and information pertinent to its members. The uptake of the revised corporate sponsorship packages has meant a significant expansion of the newsletter to accommodate the extra advertisements. However, there has also been a comparable increase in the information provided to members with the inclusion of the latest relevant political news (eg. ASMR and FASTS reports), notification of upcoming conferences and workshops, as well as the usual interesting local news courtesy of your State / NZ representatives. In the latest issue of the newsletter members will also begin to see profiles on members and their research interests, a feature that I hope the next Executive will see the benefit in continuing.

In 2002, the Society has also had two significant achievements. The first was the compilation and publishing of a Special Edition of the International Journal of Developmental Biology focusing on Developmental Biology in Australia and New Zealand. The issue Editor was our immediate past President, Brian Key, who did a fantastic job coping with the Journal's biggest ever issue! The success of this Special Edition has also exposed the Society to the international community and opened up communication with the Spanish Developmental Biology Society, with whom we might expect to be able to establish some formal links, such as international exchanges, in the future. The second achievement has been the establishment of the Society's President's Medal, including the design and striking (by the Perth Mint) of a stunning 2 ounce pure silver Medal, in time for this year's ComBio meeting. I am indebted to Prof Nadia Rosenthal (Head, EMBL Mouse Biology Programme, Monterotondo, Italy) for being able to convert and improve a 'cloudy' concept into such a beautiful piece of art! The award represents a major push by the Society to increase its national profile while appropriately recognising those researchers who have also contributed much to the development of the disciplines. It will now be the responsibility of the next Executive to secure corporate sponsorship of the award to recover some of the costs outlaid by the Society.

Finally, there are numerous people I would like to thank for their efforts during the term of this Executive. First and foremost, my gratitude is extended to my Treasurer, Blair Hopwood, for his efficiency in all matters financial, to the Society Secretary, Elaine Stead, and to Duane Rivett for allowing his arm to be twisted to become Webmaster. Still coping with his PhD studies, Duane has done a sterling job maintaining the web site as an up-to-date source of information for members as well as a forum for job and meeting advertisements. The web site is now poised for a final 'cost-free' professional redevelopment, courtesy of the University of Adelaide's Web Development Team as a return favour to myself. And I would like to thank all those members who have forwarded stunning images for use on the new web site, which hopefully will be complete and running by the end of the year. Lastly, I would like to convey particular thanks to Brian Key and Richard Harvey for their assistance and wisdom, to the Secretariat for 'keeping up', and the State / NZ representatives (both past and present) for their efforts in promoting the Society locally and input into various Society initiatives.

Timothy Cox
President

Australia & New Zealand Society for Cell and Developmental Biology Inc.

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