From Kocher to Allgöwer: The International Society of Surgery/La Société Internationale de Chirurgie*

Lloyd M. Nyhus, M.D.

Living Institute for Surgical Studies, Department of Surgery, University of Illinois College of Medicine at Chicago (M/C958), 840 South Wood Street, Chicago, Illinois 60612, U.S.A.

brought this concept to fruition [2]. Soon many other nations recognized the need for their surgeons to gather to discuss ways to better the care of their patients. Nationally oriented surgical societies thrived. It was not until 1902 that the advantage of an international body of surgeons meeting in concert was recognized, and our society, La Société Internationale de Chirurgie, was established in Belgium, Belgium, France, Germany, and Switzerland were the founding nations.

The first congress of the International Society of Surgery/Société Internationale de Chirurgie (ISS/SIC) was held in Brussels, September 18–23, 1905. Professor Theodor Kocher of Berne, Switzerland, served as president (Fig. 1). This well rounded surgeon, later to receive the first Nobel Prize awarded to a surgeon, presented the inaugural address (Fig. 2). This address [3] coming in an era of escalating improvement in operative techniques, focused on the early diagnosis and extirpation of malignant disease, not on the ever-increasing radicality of operative procedures. Kocher was one of the first to recognize the importance of breast conservation operations for cancer. He observed that “of the 212 cases of mastectomy practiced at my clinic up to 1896 ... there were eight cases in which the excision had been partial and clearly delimited. Of those, six were radically cured for the simple reason that these had been precocious operations performed in time....”

A New Era

From its auspicious beginning, the society waxed and waned for the next six decades. During times of world peace, our congresses thrived, but as noted by Fritz Linder, president in 1973, the society was a “sleeping giant” in need of awakening [4]. During the 1970s important changes occurred that allowed the society to become a truly international organization. The executive structure was revamped in 1973 so leadership could be shared among all participating nations. In 1979 the office of the Secretariat was deemed transferable, and it was moved to Switzerland, where it remains.

Key to the era of awakening has been the work of Professor Martin Allgöwer of Basel, Switzerland (Fig. 3). President from 1979 to 1981, Professor Allgöwer in 1981 assumed the leadership.
of the Secretariat; he retired from the office at the General Assembly of the 35th Congress. On behalf of all past and current members of the society, I salute Professor Allgöwer for the skilled and professional manner in which he has guided the society. Professor Allgöwer salvaged a near-bankrupt treasury through a financial agreement with the International Foundation for Postgraduate Surgery. He also made innovations in the congress that ensured a fair and balanced selection of papers, emphasized the need for new surgeons to participate, and developed the concept of integrating specialized groups with our society. Because of these and other contributions, Professor Allgöwer has gained the admiration and profound appreciation of his colleagues.

Current Activity

Biennial Congress

The cornerstone of all society activities is the biennial congress and its general assembly. At the general assembly the entire membership participates in the decision-making of the society. The program of the congress is developed over the 2 years prior to the congress; the emphasis is on general surgical topics. (Yes, general surgery is still alive and well.) Our sister societies—the International Association of Endocrine Surgeons, the International Association for the Surgery of Trauma and Surgical Intensive Care, and the International Association for Nutrition and Metabolism—present programs during the congress, and our program committee assists them with planning and paper selection. Thirteen other international groups join our congress, providing a wide range of presentations. Thus the congress encompasses a total week of expertise in surgical science—International Surgical Week.

Regional Meetings

Under the leadership of J. Rüdiger Siewert, of Munich, three small scientific meetings have been cosponsored by the ISS/SIC and national surgical societies. Twelve hundred surgeons participated in these programs (Moscow 1990, Mexico City 1992, and Santiago 1993). I hope our society’s leaders will nurture this important new educational outreach program so the surgical world may witness our expanding educational programs.

World Journal of Surgery

The World Journal of Surgery, a world-class surgical journal, was first published in 1977 under the editorship of Professor Marshall Orloff, of San Diego. Each issue highlights a surgical subject in a “World Progress in Surgery.” Each symposium is developed by a guest editor who has an international reputation. The journal also publishes refereed articles. Dr. Orloff’s successors—James D. Hardy (1981–1983), Samuel A. Wells (1983–1993), and Ronald K. Tompkins (1993 to the present)—have continued to increase the strength of the journal. Because of the “World Progress in Surgery” articles, the International Federation of Surgical Colleges, which has an interest in supporting libraries of medicine.