The American Society of Nuclear Cardiology

In previous columns, my colleagues and I introduced various professional medical societies in the United States that are involved in the practice of nuclear medicine. A relative newcomer to the ranks is the American Society of Nuclear Cardiology (ASNC), which was organized in March of 1993. Drs. Jeffrey Leppo, Frans Wackers, Ami Iskandrian, and Mario Verani were the first four Presidents of the organization. In March of 1997 I became the fifth president.

One could appropriately ask why a separate organization needed to promote the field of nuclear cardiology when there was already in existence the Society of Nuclear Medicine, the American College of Nuclear Physicians, the American College of Cardiology and the American College for Radiology. Each of these organizations has an interest in nuclear cardiology, but the reality in the United States is that there are medical disciplines other than nuclear medicine that practice nuclear cardiology. None of these organizations fully represents all the individuals who are involved in the research or clinical practice of nuclear cardiology. Thus, membership in any of these professional medical societies failed to account for all the practitioners or the interests and promotion of the field. ASNC was organized to represent all individuals who practice nuclear cardiology, regardless of their training. This month I will review the mission of the ASNC and what it has been able to accomplish in its 4 years of existence. Current information about the ASNC and its various activities can be obtained on the World Wide Web at www.asnc.org or by e-mail at admin@asnc.org.

What is the mission of the ASNC?

The ASNC was organized to foster and promote the optimal delivery of nuclear cardiology service by focusing on the following areas: the development of standards of professional education and training, the establishment of guidelines for clinical performance, and the promotion of nuclear cardiology research. In the 4 years in which it has been in existence, the ASNC has worked aggressively to accomplish these goals. Membership has increased and the range of activities has expanded to reflect the vital growth of nuclear cardiology within the field of nuclear medicine.

Who has joined the ASNC?

Since March of 1994, the ASNC has grown to more than 2700 members. Members from outside the United States account for 19.6% of the total membership, and the organization represents 52 different countries, mostly from Europe, Asia, and Latin America. The rate of growth was 38% in year 3 and 33% in year 4. Regular members, consisting of physicians and nuclear cardiology scientists, represent 81% of the membership. Affiliate members are physicians-in-training and constitute 3.4% of the membership. Associate members are technologists, computer specialists, industry members and engineers and represent 15.6% of the members. The annual renewal rate has been 94% which compares favorably with other nuclear medicine societies. Members are from very diverse backgrounds and include cardiologists, radiologists and nuclear medicine physicians. This diversity reflects the commitment to promoting all practitioners of the field, regardless of background.

What are the educational programs?

The organization sought and received accreditation by the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education (ACCME) and participants in the various activities receive credit for their participation. Some of the various ASNC programs are listed in the following section.

Continuing medical education programs

The ASNC has actively organized educational programs at the annual national scientific meetings of the following organizations: the Society of Nuclear Medicine, the American Heart Association, and the American College of Cardiology. In general, topics have focused on the clinical importance of nuclear cardiology as part of the mainstream process for the clinical diagnosis and management of patients with heart disease. Presenting this information to internists, primary care physicians, and cardiologists is vitally important as they have the option of sending their patients to any of the available diagnostic modalities. Showing them how nuclear cardiology offers not only diagnostic but also prognostic information is essential for having patients referred for nuclear cardiology procedures rather than competing modalities such as stress echocardiography and ultrafast CT. Sessions have included a great emphasis on audience participation and interaction rather than didactic programs. These meetings have
included plenty of panels and opportunities for the audience to ask questions.

Prominent cardiologists such as Drs. Eric Topel, Thomas Ryan, Bernard Gersh, and Hein Wellens, and other recognized experts outside of nuclear cardiology have been invited to participate in these sessions. This has introduced these influential thought leaders in clinical cardiology to our field and the role it can play in patient management. The participation of these individuals has helped to attract large audiences, many of whom would normally not go to sessions devoted exclusively to nuclear cardiology.

These more formal programs are usually preceded by a “Read with the Experts” session using computer workstations and an audience response system that allows practicing nuclear cardiologists to develop their clinical skills in a format similar to everyday reading sessions. Attendance at the sessions has reached as high as 450. Some members of the audience arrive at 12 noon for the “Read with the Experts” session and stay to the end of the program, which is usually at 7:30 p.m. - a time commitment I am not certain I would make unless being held captive in my capacity as an organizer or participant.

International Congress of Nuclear Cardiology

There have been three meetings jointly sponsored every other year by the ASNC, the Cardiovascular Committee of the European Association of Nuclear Medicine, and the Working Group on Nuclear Cardiology and Magnetic Resonance of the European Society of Cardiology. In 1993 and 1995 the meetings were held in Cannes, France, and the most recent meeting was held in April, 1997 in Florence, Italy with an attendance of 1200 from more than 50 different countries. More than 500 original abstracts in nuclear cardiology have been presented at each meeting. In addition there have been moderated poster sessions, “Meet and Read with the Experts” sessions, controversies and a core curriculum program. The abstracts have been published as a supplement to the Journal of Nuclear Cardiology.

Again, an effort has been made to attract international experts from outside the field of nuclear cardiology to share their views on how they use nuclear cardiology.

ASNC tutorial

The first tutorial was held in Washington, DC, in September of 1996. The program was intended as a basic review of the practical aspects of clinical nuclear cardiology. Not knowing what sort of demand would exist for such a program, the organizers planned for an audience of approximately 250, but were overwhelmed by the response and the registration had to be closed at 800 due to lack of space.

An entire day of the program was devoted to “Read with the Experts” sessions in which half of the audience attended a large auditorium session organized by Drs. Berman and Maddahi. The other half of the audience met in small classroom-style sessions using a computer workstation and an “expert” who reviewed a series of cases. The small room format was more conducive to allowing audience/expert interactions. In these smaller sessions the audience has the opportunity to ask those “dumb” questions that all of us want to ask, but are afraid to do so in a large auditorium. One can also more freely challenge the preposterous remarks or blatantly wrong image interpretations made by the so-called experts. In the second half of the day, the groups switched formats, thus allowing everyone to participate in both types of reading sessions.

This type of large and small group interaction was extremely well received and will be increased at future ASNC meetings. The second tutorial will be held in Boston, Massachusetts, on September 12-14, 1997. Commitment for the space in Boston was made prior to the September 1996 meeting and the organizers again committed to a small space for the meeting and registration may again have to be limited. A commitment has been made for a meeting in September, 1998 in New Orleans.

Wintergreen Conference

Three meetings organized by Drs. Barry Zaret and George Beller were held in July of 1992, 1994, and 1996 in Wintergreen, Virginia. These meetings serve a very different purpose than the educational meetings listed above. The Wintergreen Conference has assembled invited international thought leaders in all areas of clinical and research nuclear cardiology in order to identify new directions for the field and to attempt to reach a consensus on important topics. Preparations have already started for the next meeting in July, 1998.

Nuclear Cardiology Self-assessment Program

The Nuclear Cardiology Self-assessment Program consists of a series of clinical images on computer disks with questions on interpretations and management. The initial program was developed by Drs. Tilkemeier, Heller and Wackers. Subscribers who answer the questions and submit them to ASNC receive educational credits. The program has been very well received and to date nearly 1000 copies have been sold. Plans are underway for the next program which will be distributed on a CD disc and contain gated SPET images as well as other innovations made possible by the use of the DICOM format and specific viewers that will allow the studies to be displayed on IBM- and Macintosh-based systems. Completion of this program is expected by the end of 1997.

The Journal of Nuclear Cardiology

With the first issue coming out in 1994 under the editorship of Dr. Barry Zaret, the official journal of the ASNC has risen to a paid distribution of 4856 subscriptions and 225 free distributions for a total distribution of 5081 issues. Although the majority of distribution is in the USA, there are 314 paid subscriptions in Europe alone. The journal is published every other month.

The journal has received full recognition and listing by Index Medicus. In addition to publishing original basic science and clinical research, it has established a tradition of publishing editorials, reviews of important issues, supplements of important symposia, and original guidelines for nuclear cardiology.