Plenary lecture

Our unique society

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Thank you, Mr President, for asking me to talk about our Society. I have chosen the title of Our Unique Society because, in the English Dictionary, unique is defined as the one and only, with no like or equal – in other words, it is different from all others. We all know that our doors are always open to those who are interested in histamine research and we all know that we pay no subscription to be a member. Our Rules tell us that the subscription shall be fixed each year (and it used to be 3 English Pounds or its equivalent) but we had to abandon this idea when it was found to be impossible to gather these dues from certain European countries. Another Rule which we have abandoned in recent years is the one enabling members to invite up to two non-members to each Meeting. You see we are a very liberal and democratic Society – in fact, a unique one.

As for our History, most of you will know we were born in Paris in May 1972 under the name of the European branch of the Histamine Club. This branch developed from the former International Histamine Club which originally met during each triennial International Congress of Physiology. At the Eighth Meeting of the European branch in May 1979, held on a boat cruising from Stockholm to Helsinki and back, the title changed to the present European Histamine Research Society (or EHRS, for short) to indicate the importance of the scientific work of members as well as to obtain greater recognition as a Society and not as a Club. The title was also changed to help us secure funds to support Meetings in the future. For the record, our Unique Society meets once a year and has now visited West Germany three times, France twice, England twice, Denmark twice, Italy twice, Poland once, Sweden once, Hungary once, Yugoslavia once and Czechoslovakia once. We aim to promote good fellowship and professional relationships in the field of histamine research within Europe, and so far we have succeeded.

Let me now say a word or two about Meetings. We are extremely lucky in having as members, many European Histaminologists who have invited us to their cities for our gatherings and we are lucky to be fixed up conditionally until the year 1993. May we record a big Thank You to the Organizers of our Meetings so far. Our programmes have recently taken on a regular character – 3 days of meeting, with half of one of the days set aside for an Excursion (away from it all, they say). From the scientific viewpoint, the Meetings have become popular in encouraging workers to present even their first-ever paper or to practice presentation techniques. I recall that the British Smith, Kline & French Research Institute (sadly now no longer too interested in our problem) used 5 of their workers one year to describe their work for the very first time. We try hard each year for the Organizer of the Meeting (who becomes the President for that year) to arrange his or her own programme, including the Conference lecture or lectures, and each has a completely free hand in this. Of course, guidance is given when required. Policy is decided by the
Secretaries of each Country represented in the Society (and there 16 of them at the moment) when they meet once a year.

You might say that this guy (that’s me) has not mentioned anything about the scientific side of our Society but truly we have kept up with recent developments in histamine research.

Over the past 16 years, we have enlarged our horizons, for example of H₁- and H₂-antagonists, as well as H₃-receptors, and the link between histamine and the Central Nervous System. A recent favourite amongst our many members has been histamine release from mast cells. We have, of course, never forgotten the importance of histamine in the control of circulation, the gastrointestinal tract, and respiration. I like to involve the Society in discussing histamine and disease processes such as allergy and inflammation. What about the true story of a Doctor going to a Restaurant for a meal and then being put a bit off by the fact that the waitress, who came to the table to take the order, kept scratching her nose. He said, “Tell me, my girl, have you got eczema?” “No”, snuffled the waitress, “Only what you see on the Menu.”

Talking of our Society Meetings, I have looked through reports published each year as Editorials in Agents and Actions. Maybe many of you have never read these before. They are really Social or Secret minutes of Meetings, often describing the unusual events which take place. For example, at the 10th Meeting in 1981 in Hannover, we experienced the art of drinking from two glasses at the same time, the cognac being held over the beer but mixed before contact with the mouth. Suitable protective clothing was provided and certificates were given to those who succeeded without spilling a drop. At this Meeting, I recall one German worker saying “After injections of histamine, guinea-pigs sometimes die, sometimes do not, sometimes die frequently, but they do not die spontaneously, only automatically.”

At the next Meeting in Bled in Yugoslavia, we visited the fantastic Wonder of the World called Postojna Caves where we had a half-an-hour’s train ride underground, followed by an hour’s walk before emerging to daylight. Some, I’m sure, recall that Meeting as we stayed at a Hotel called The Grand Toplice. A French worker at the Meeting said “To die or not to die, that is the question. Is it nobler to lower the histidine decarboxylase activity than to reduce the histamine content?”

On to the 12th Meeting in Brighton, by the Sea, where it was too cold for bathing. We learned from one English worker not to write your Abstract before you’ve done the work (as he had done), for he reported quite the opposite result to that shown in the Abstract. Incidentally, two days after that Meeting closed, a telegram was received from two Italian members to say they were not coming to the Meeting.

In Florence in 1984, the Chairman was heard to say “I will now introduce two charming young ladies, both of whom were my students and therefore have been through my hands.” At this Meeting, we visited the fascinating San Gimignano with its high Museum Tower reached by some treacherous steps.

In Aachen in 1985, we had for the first time prizes for the most fascinating and discussion-provoking Posters. I recall that one Polish member, giving his paper, groaned that the torch used for pointing out items on the screen was not working, only to find he had the wrong end facing the screen and the light was shining on his own stomach.

At the 15th Meeting in Odense in 1986, when Michael Beaven from Bethesda (a former student of mine) spoke on Mechanisms Involved in Signal Transduction, a Danish member told us that playing games with compounds acting on mast cells is now like playing games on computers. Another member made a special plea to really treat your samples of mast cells with loving care! At one session, the audience was amazed when the screen in front of them moved up to the ceiling at the same time as the lights in the roof actually moved down. You bet those in the front row quickly took cover.

Last year, in the High Tatras in Czechoslovakia, after a super Conference lecture by Piero Manzoni on histamine release by Free Radicals, we visited a Thermal Spa where another Italian member said her bath was full of bubbles and when pressed as to the composition of the bubbles, was convinced they were bubbles of carbon monoxide! How ignorant some of us can be! It reminds me of the story of the patient who asked his Doctor “And when my arm is better, will I be able to play my trombone?” “Yes, of course” said the Doctor, “you’ll have no trouble at all.” “That’s splendid, Doc.” said the patient “I could never play it before.” How do I know all about these pithy