

Federation of South African Societies of Pathology – The first 50 years

Ronald O C Kaschula

Undergraduate training in medicine began in a very slow step wise manner from the establishment of the South African College in 1829 where initial training was undertaken in chemistry and physiology and then sending candidates to Britain to complete their medical training. By 1880 Edinburgh University was the favourite venue for completing this training. The University of the Cape of Good Hope emerged from the South African College and in 1911 appointed professors of Anatomy and Physiology who commenced teaching in 1912 and producing their first medical doctors in 1922 that was quickly followed by the formation of additional medical schools in Johannesburg and Pretoria. In the meanwhile the South African Institute for Medical Research was formed in 1913 under the influence of the Chamber of Mines, Witwatersrand Native Labour Association and Sir Percy Fitzpatrick. We do not have a clear record of where and who the first locally trained pathologists were but it is common knowledge that Basil James Pavey Becker who became professor of Pathology and Bacteriology at Witwatersrand University was among the earliest.

During the late 1950s when additional Medical schools were established at the University of Natal and Stellenbosch University the need for South Africa to have a National Pathology Group was recognised but, because of the high cost of travel between the centres where academic pathology was practised, this objective could not readily be achieved. The pathologists in Johannesburg and Pretoria formed a regional association called the Transvaal Society of Pathologists who met regularly in the two centres while Cape Town and Stellenbosch University laboratory scientists formed a local Experimental Biology Group that went beyond the realms of pathology to include physiology and pharmacology and so provided a larger number of members to enhance participation at their meetings.

Under the leadership of Professor Becker (affectionately called Bunny Becker), while he was chairman of the Transvaal Society of Pathology and with the support of professors in Laboratory Medicine departments in Pretoria, Cape Town and Durban, an inaugural meeting was called in the Nurses' Home of the National Hospital in Bloemfontein during the morning of 6 August 1960. There were 34 delegates, 33 South Africans (3 ladies) and one British visitor. They agreed upon the formation of the South African Society of Pathologists (SASP) that embraced all disciplines of laboratory medicine and prepared a working constitution. That afternoon ten multi-disciplinary papers were read. The delegates had all motored to and from Bloemfontein and, because of the need for self-funding the cost of travel and accommodation, it was then decided that future congresses would be held in Bloemfontein. However, after three such annual congresses, the work involved in making the regular arrangement by Dr Nesor, the solitary pathologist in Bloemfontein and member of the society, and an improved provision of funding from various sources for attendance at medical congresses, it was decided that the venue for the annual congress should rotate sequentially among the centres that have Medical Faculties.

At the time of the formation of the SASP there was only one pathology discipline on the registry of specialities of the South African Medical and Dental Council (SAMDC). There was no College of Pathologists anywhere in the British Commonwealth and all pathologists had a general training that covered all aspects of Morbid Anatomical Pathology, Surgical Pathology, Bacteriology, Parasitology, Virology, Mycology, Immunology, Chemical Pathology,

Endocrinology, Haematology and Forensic Pathology. The total number of medical practitioners and scientists practising in laboratory medicine was small and with this being the only national organization of pathologists that also included non-medically qualified scientists in its membership, SASP was called upon to represent laboratory based professionals on a wide spectrum of issues.

The initial objectives of the society were to “advance pathology and to facilitate contact between those interested in pathology and related subjects”. Recognizing that pathology, in its broadest sense, is the foundation on which the whole edifice of health care service and research rests, the shortage of pathologists in the country was then and still is a matter for concern. Initially, there were problems with recruitment and while this was being resolved, a significant exodus of our best, well trained young pathologists to affluent countries occurred. The untimely death of our first president, Professor Bunny Becker, on 8 December 1966 retarded the growth of pathology but distinguished and sometimes eccentric characters gradually emerged and took up the cudgels.

In 1962 in Zurich, Switzerland, the society became affiliated to the International Council of Societies of Pathology and was there represented by Professor James Murray of Johannesburg, who was to become the third president in 1968. In 1966 our society became affiliated to the International Academy of Pathology and shortly thereafter Professor James Murray was appointed as a vice-president of the Academy and member of its executive committee. Professors Cornelius J Uys, Ronald O C Kaschula and Martin Hale have subsequently held this office in the International Academy.

On the local national scene regular annual congresses have been held and the number and quality of presentations have progressively increased. By inviting and sponsoring selected personalities to participate in our congresses we have fostered contact with overseas experts and their participation in educational activities that enhances the practice of pathology and all forms of laboratory based medicine in our region. Brochures of congress proceedings, together with trade exhibits, have been a feature of the meetings since 1968.

For the society to survive it had to avoid being involved in national politics – the memories of the South African War still kept English and Afrikaner South Africans at some distance from each other while the Apartheid laws meant that there was minimal opportunity or indigenous and Asian people to advance and participate. However the Society had to represent the profession in organizations such as the Standing Committee on Education, National Laboratory Service Committee and was advisory to SAMDC on the redefining of pathology specialities, the duration and format of training for pathologists, the training and registration of medical natural scientists and technologists, as well as for forensic and dental pathology.

The old SASP had a number of distinguished and loveable characters who, in different ways, influenced the practice of laboratory medicine. Among these are:
Professor James Thomson (from Cape Town), who made his congress presentations without photographs, but instead made picturesque drawings on a black chalkboard having trained under Prof Ashoff in Germany when macro and micro photography was in its infancy.

Professor James Gear (from Johannesburg), an internationally renowned virologist from Johannesburg, who had diverse insights and knowledge well beyond his speciality and having manned the first mobile laboratory in North Africa during the Second World War.

Dr Shirley Siew, also from Johannesburg, although a refugee from Russia, developed an interest and skill in electron microscopy when this was still in its infancy.

Professor Francois Retief, a haematologist who moved around South Africa in various work situations but regularly made scientific presentations in *ware* Afrikaans and who encouraged the development of scientific terminology for the language.

Dr Bob McCully, a veterinary pathologist from USA, with an uncanny sense of humour, who was able to stimulate interest in veterinary pathology that went as far as bilharziasis in the hippopotamus.

Over the years the society was progressively forced to examine itself and its stance in the South African socio-political situation. Much of this was initiated by overseas visitors who were increasingly unwilling to come to South Africa unless particular conditions pertaining to our situation were met. However, the changes for the society to increasingly reflect the spectrum of the country's racial and ethnic mix was already occurring in the training and recruiting of young pathologists and laboratory scientists into academia and to Society Membership from all ethnic, racial and cultural groups.

During 1986 and 1987 the society made a significant change to its constitution as the constituent disciplines had meanwhile grown to be so large that they had formed their own organizational structures that had to function independently of SASP. Under the leadership of the then presidents, Professors Frans Taljaard (of Stellenbosch) and Anton Heynes (of Bloemfontein), the society became a federation of four independent professional groupings, namely:

SA Division of International Academy of Pathology for Anatomical Pathologists;

SA Association of Clinical Biochemists for Chemical Pathologists and Biochemists;

SA Society for Haematology;

SA Society of Medical Microbiology and Virology.

From that time the collective membership of the Federation has grown considerably. During October 1995 in Auckland, New Zealand, FSASP was admitted to membership of the World Association of Societies of Pathology with Professor ROC Kaschula representing South Africa. At that time FSASP was asked to consider being involved in and possibly driving the development of pathology and the broader aspects of laboratory medicine in all developing countries but especially in Africa. Several of our longstanding senior members, including Professors Kaschula, Vermaak, van den Ende and Tiltman, soon became members of the Association of Pathologists from East, Central and Southern Africa and participated in collaborative research, teaching activities and the examination and certification of pathologists in Africa. Since 1990 FSASP has increasingly sponsored and encouraged colleagues from Central and East Africa to participate in local congresses and training courses. The theme for the 1997 congress was appropriately labelled "Outreach into Africa" and portrayed a new direction for the thrust of the Federation's activities. The South African Division of IAP, together with the British Division, drove the development of pathology in East and Central Africa where a separate East African Division of IAP was established in 2008. In spite of a strong desire to continue the process of reaching out into Africa our membership became static at the turn of the

century and briefly fell as a result of severe financial downgrading of academic laboratory medicine. However, the recently formed National Health Laboratory Service has taken a more supportive attitude to developing research and training activities for laboratory scientists but there is still much to be done. It is hoped that all aspects of Laboratory Medicine on our continent will flourish with the hosting the international congress of the IAP in October 2012. Never the less there are challenges that we together with our political masters and funding industries have to overcome collectively in achieving an equitable balance between transformation, gaining enhanced skills, maintaining and advancing standards, rewarding excellence, retaining superior performers and a continued will to sacrificially serve all the people of our country and continent.