

The International Society of Dermatopathology at 25 Years of Age

A New Era Has Begun

Wolfgang Weyers, MD

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The International Society of Dermatopathology was founded in Amsterdam in 1979. In a letter of invitation, the first president of the Society, A. Bernard Ackerman, expressed his hope that the Society would become a forum “where colleagues from different parts of the world could assemble to exchange ideas on the subject of dermatopathology and engage in good fellowship.”¹ This hope has been fulfilled. At meetings of the Society, many new ideas were forged and many friendships created among colleagues from different countries. Most of those meetings were memorable, not only because of the wealth of ideas and valuable information shared that could be applied immediately in the daily work at the microscope, but also because organizers of the annual Colloquia and Symposia sought to create a unique ambience and to outdo one another in regard to hospitality, beauty of the meeting venue, and magnificence of the associated cultural and social framework.

Naturally, the quality of meetings of the Society varied. Some meetings were poorly organized and conducted without great passion, whereas others turned into a series of spectacular events. In all meetings, the presentations ranged from excellent to poor, and the overall quality of the meeting was determined by the proportion of those presentations. The first years of the Society were the most vibrant ones because, at that time, diagnostic dermatopathology was still developing and systematic studies of it resulted in the description of many new clues to histopathologic diagnoses, new criteria, and “new” diseases, ranging from microcystic adnexal carcinoma to bacillary angiomatosis.² In the ensuing years, original observations continued to be made, additional clues and pitfalls in diagnoses were described, and “new” diseases were characterized, such as nephrogenic fibrosing dermopathy in 2000 and circumscribed acral hypokeratosis in 2002.^{3–5}

As the International Society of Dermatopathology grew older, it was inevitable that the same subjects were repeatedly addressed, and although the perspectives changed, redundancies

could not be avoided. There were other problems, too. One was a decreasing interest in dermatopathology in the United States, where residents in dermatology tended to focus on surgery rather than on dermatopathology. As a consequence, the number of dermatologists applying for the American Board Certification in dermatopathology decreased rapidly. There was also a decrease in the number of original articles submitted to the official journal of the Society, the *American Journal of Dermatopathology*. Moreover, some of the best studies concerning the histopathology of skin diseases published in journals devoted to dermatopathology, dermatology, and general pathology were never presented at meetings of the Society. Those meetings, therefore, failed to reflect the true spectrum of activities in dermatopathology at an international level. All too often, free communications presented at the annual Colloquia or Symposia of the Society were uninspired, and the sessions devoted to them were badly attended, rather than being perceived as one of the highlights of the meeting. All this coincided with a proliferation of meetings in dermatopathology, many of which were co-sponsored by the International Society of Dermatopathology, and whose quality often was excellent. In principle, this was a positive development, but it came to bear severely on the quality of the annual Colloquia or Symposia of the Society, because the energy of its members was dissipated, rather than being concentrated.

These were problems that confronted the officers of the Society at a time of transition, when the founding members, one after the other, reached the age of retirement and handed over the lead to members of a younger generation who had still been in medical school when the Society was founded in 1979. Most significantly, after 25 years of service to the Society, A. Bernard Ackerman, the first president of the Society, Spiritus Rector, organizer of most of its meetings, and teacher of nearly all its leading members, retired in July 2004. The 25th Symposium in Lisbon in September 2004 was the first annual meeting of the Society that Ackerman did not attend. Moreover, Jorge L. Sánchez, another former president and organizer of many meetings, could not travel to Lisbon because a hurricane hit Puerto Rico, closing the airport. The Symposium in Lisbon thus took place in the absence of those two men who, more than anybody else, had shaped and nurtured the Society in the preceding years. For that reason, the meeting in Lisbon was a special one, a watershed in the history of the Society.

The importance of the meeting in Lisbon was enhanced by other factors. The preceding 3 years had been the most

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Reprints: Wolfgang Weyers, MD, Center for Dermatopathology, Engelbergerstr.
19, 79106 Freiburg, Germany.
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troublesome in the history of the Society. At the 22nd Symposium in Stresa in 2001, Jorge L. Sánchez was succeeded by Lorenzo Cerroni of Graz as President of the Society. The new Secretary and President-Elect was Noreen Walsh of Halifax, but she stepped down from her position after a few months, a singular event in the history of the Society. Omar Sangüeza, Treasurer of the Society, was appointed Secretary without having been elected by the General Assembly. At that time, the affairs of the Society were run by a commercial company in Illinois, which charged astronomical fees for its services, to the point that the Society accumulated a huge deficit in 2002, forcing it to terminate activities such as the fellowship program for colleagues from developing countries. The 23rd Symposium in Berlin was satisfactory in regard to its scientific content, but it lacked the ambience that had characterized so many meetings before it. In fact, it was the first meeting of the International Society of Dermatopathology, and maybe the first meeting in dermatopathology in general, in which even a desperate search for food at the coffee break did not net even a single biscuit. The 24th Symposium of the Society was to be held in Istanbul, but at the meeting in Berlin it was canceled because the local organizers had failed to cooperate with the officers of the Society. In the preceding months, countless fax and e-mail messages of the officers of the Society had been left unanswered. Cancellation of a Symposium was again a singular event in the history of the Society and a major blow to its prospects. And then came the meeting in Lisbon, the first one in the absence of its founder, A. Bernard Ackerman, a meeting organized by colleagues without a significant record of contributions to the Society, and a meeting outside Central Europe, where most members of the Society reside. Poor attendance, therefore, had to be anticipated.

But those anxieties were not borne out. With 240 participants, attendance of the Symposium in Lisbon was not great but satisfactory. The venue of the meeting was excellent: the Centro Cultural de Belém, a beautiful modern building close to the magnificent tower of Belém and right across the famous Jerónimos Monastery, another major historical landmark of Lisbon. The meeting room was just the right size, and the breaks could be enjoyed on a spacious, sunny terrace with a view on the Rio Tejo. The theme of the Symposium, "Discoveries in Dermatopathology," was well chosen because it reflected both the objective of dermatopathology as a scientific discipline and the proud history of discoverers from the country where the congress convened, such as Bartholomeu Diaz, Vasco da Gama, and Pedro Alvares Cabral.

The program of the Symposium had its highlights and disappointments. Among the highlights was an excellent presentation by Philip LeBoit. In a session devoted to the history of discoveries in dermatopathology, LeBoit elucidated the concept of keratosis lichenoides chronica, with clinical pictures and photomicrographs of cases published in the literature and several cases of his own. LeBoit conceded that many cases designated as keratosis lichenoides chronica in the literature show changes produced solely by animated scratching, including the first patient reported by Kaposi as "lichen ruber moniliformis" in 1886. In his view, however, other cases are examples of an authentic disease that can be diagnosed with specificity on the basis of clinical and histopathologic

changes. Clinically, that disease is characterized by centrofacial erythema and widespread keratotic papules with a predilection for the flexor aspects of the extremities. Linear lesions are common and probably result from a Koebner phenomenon induced by scratching. Histopathologically, lesions show alternating areas of hyperplasia and atrophy of the epidermis, parakeratosis often arranged in columns emanating from adnexal structures and containing neutrophils, prominent telangiectases, and a patchy lichenoid infiltrate composed of lymphocytes and a variable number of plasma cells. LeBoit had written about that subject before,⁶ but in his presentation in Lisbon, he excelled in wedding together historical, clinical, and histopathologic aspects, drawing a coherent picture of what seems to be a distinct and unique entity.

Other highlights of the Symposium included the Self-Assessment Course, organized and chaired by Heinz Kutzner of Friedrichshafen and Ken Resnick of Philadelphia; and the Clinicopathologic Conference in which Lorenzo Cerroni engaged the audience by showing clinical and histopathologic pictures and giving everybody the chance to come to his or her own diagnosis before a final diagnosis was rendered. This session, more than any other one, demonstrated the power of, and the need for, dermatopathology as a distinct field of medicine. Many diagnoses that are difficult or impossible to make on clinical or histopathologic grounds alone become easy when those two aspects of a disease are wedded together. Among the free communications were several interesting studies. For example, Almut Böer of Hamburg demonstrated histopathological patterns in Fox-Fordyce disease, and Dimitri Kazakov of Pilsen alluded to the distribution of cells in a carcinoid-like pattern as a clue to sebaceous differentiation in adnexal neoplasms. In the Ackerman lecture, Reim Willemze of Leiden reviewed the progress in the understanding and classification of cutaneous lymphomas, and in his valedictory lecture as President of the Society, Lorenzo Cerroni spoke about the "illusion of certainty," exceeding the narrow limits of dermatopathology and putting the work at the microscope into the broader perspective of how we perceive the world through our senses and organize it in artificial categories to be able to deal with it.

Overall, the proportion of good to excellent lectures at the Symposium in Lisbon compared favorably to many other Colloquia and Symposia of the Society. The same is true for the organization of it. The local organizers, chief among them Esmeralda Vale and Luis Soares Almeida, succeeded in reviving the atmosphere of warmth and friendship that had characterized so many meetings of the Society in preceding years. Participants were welcomed personally at the registration desk. The first day of the Symposium was concluded with a Welcome Cocktail at Castelo S. Jorge, an old castle overlying Lisbon that offered a spectacular view over the center of the city. On the second evening, a gala dinner was organized in a botanical garden. Participants were picked up by bus at their hotels and were taken to Parque Eduardo VII, where a labyrinth of little pathways illuminated by candle light led their way into the garden. At the conclusion of the Symposium, most participants had at least a few more hours to explore the magnificent city of Lisbon. Only a few will have left without fond memories.



FIGURE 1. Participants Dmitry Kazakov, Thomas Mentzel, Wolfgang Weyers, and Dieter Metz explore Lisbon, beyond dermatopathology (photograph courtesy of Dr. Bernhard Zelger).

In the History of the International Society of Dermatopathology published on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of its founding in 1999, I pointed out that:

■ *friendship is an essential ingredient of a society, and it grows best in the fertile soil of warm, shared memories. To build a strong foundation, one needs bricks and mortar. For a scientific society, the bricks are new ideas and observations, and the mortar is shared memories. At meetings of a healthy society, both ingredients are provided in abundance, as at many meetings of the International Society of Dermatopathology during its first 20 years.*²

Both ingredients were also provided at the 25th Symposium in Lisbon.

At the meeting in Lisbon, there was a change of guard of the officers of the Society. The Secretary, Omar Sangüeza, automatically succeeded Lorenzo Cerroni as President of the Society. Giovanni Borroni of Pavia was elected Vice President, and the editor of the *American Journal of Dermatopathology*, Philip E. LeBoit of San Francisco, was elected Secretary-Treasurer and will succeed Omar Sangüeza as President in 2007. At the meeting of the Executive Committee, Omar Sangüeza reported that, thanks to a brisk reduction of administration costs, the financial situation of the Society is stable again, a huge deficit having been turned into a moderate gain. Beginning next year, it will be possible to give a travel stipend to applicants from developing countries to enable them to attend meetings of the Society. The fellowship program of the

Society can probably be reinstated in the near future. Helmut Kerl reported on the first European examination in dermatopathology that was given in Frankfurt in December 2003. Although not yet recognized officially, that examination is an important step toward the recognition of dermatopathology as a distinct subspecialty for dermatologists and pathologists in Europe.⁷ The next annual Symposium of the Society will be held in Brasilia in May 2005. This meeting will also mark another cornerstone for the Society. It will be the first time that a South American country hosts this meeting. The decision of the Society in favor of Brasilia reflects the growing interest in dermatopathology in that part of the world. Following Brasilia, the next Symposia will be held in Malaga in 2006 and in Paris in 2007.

Each of those meetings is important. With the Symposium in Lisbon, a new era has begun. The start was successful, but it is crucial that the standards set in Lisbon be maintained and improved, the ambience of the meeting be created anew, and the quality of the scientific program be at least reached, or exceeded. To this end, officers of the Society and local organizers must keep their fingers on the pulse of dermatopathology, screen the literature for interesting studies and ideas, and invite speakers to present their findings at meetings of the Society as soon as, or even before, they are published. In this regard, it may be a fortunate circumstance that the new Secretary of the Society is also the editor of the *American Journal of Dermatopathology*. Some sessions of future meetings should be devoted to a major theme, as has been the case in Lisbon, and central elements of the Symposia, such as the Self-Assessment Course and the Clinicopathologic Conference, must be maintained at the high level demonstrated in Lisbon and at various meetings before. If this is done, the tenure of Omar Sangüeza will be easier than that of Lorenzo Cerroni, and the Society will survive!!

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