

## **Immunology Meetings in Opatija: A Way to Establish Tradition and International Recognition**

Daniel Rukavina and Thomas J. Gill III<sup>1</sup>

*Department of Physiology and Immunology, University of Rijeka, School of Medicine, Rijeka, Croatia; and <sup>1</sup>Department of Pathology, School of Medicine, University of Pittsburgh, PA, USA.*

We would like to use the opportunity of the Croatian Medical Journal's world-wide distribution, and its special attention to physicians and scientists of various biomedical profiles of Croatian origin who live and work in foreign countries, to share with them our pleasant experience in how a purely scientific activity, i.e., the organization of a scientific meeting, can contribute to an international recognition of a newly-established, small country, even during the hardships of the war that has been waged against it.

### **First Alps Adria Immunology and Allergology Meeting**

The part of Europe between the Alps and the Adriatic has for centuries been marked by a co-existent development of several civilizations, hardly comparable to any other part of Europe. Cultural, social, scientific, and other connections between Vienna, Graz, Venice, Budapest, Padua, Trieste, Munich, Ljubljana, Zagreb, and Rijeka, to mention only some prominent cities, left such deep impressions which could not be effaced during the seven decades (1918-1988) when the co-operation was somewhat less intensive. The idea of organizing a meeting of immunologists and allergologists from the Alps-Adria region was born eight years ago (1988) in the discussions between Dragan Dekaris from Zagreb and Daniel Rukavina from Rijeka. The idea was enthusiastically supported by many Croatian immunologists and by the Croatian Immunological Society. The Organizing Committee was formed and broad activities were launched to inform and attract all potential immunologists in the Alps Adria region. On November 25-26, 1989, a meeting of the International Scientific Committee, composed of the representatives from the Alps Adria region, was held in Opatija. The International Committee worked out an outline of the scientific program and elected the Scientific Committee of the meeting under the presidency of D. Dekaris.

In December 1989, D. Rukavina, together with Juraj Sepcic and Miljenko Doric, visited immunology laboratories and clinics in Trieste, Padua, Verona, Milan, Graz and Klagenfurt, and discussed the future collaboration in the Alps Adria region. All these activities were in progress during the time of tensions among the countries that were parts of the former Yugoslavia, and during the elections which established Croatia as an independent country.

The First Meeting was held on October 14-17, 1990, under the auspices of Dr Franjo Tudjman, President of the Republic of Croatia. The meeting was attended by a remarkable number of leading immunologists from the Alps Adria region and other parts of Europe and USA. Altogether 350 participants attended the meeting and 275 reports were presented (240 of them in workshops). The scientific program was composed of eight symposia with 34 invited speakers and 22 workshops, covering almost all fields of immunology. The contributions of the invited speakers (15 papers) were published in a regular issue of *Periodicum Biologorum* (Vol. 93, No 1., 1991, pp. 47-146).

The first meeting also enabled us to learn about the current situation in immunological research and clinical practice in all regions, and to meet most of the researchers personally. The atmosphere of the meeting, both scientific and social, stimulated personal contacts, discussions, exchange of opinion, and the promotion of future collaboration. Participants of the Meeting agreed that the collaboration should be enhanced and supported by the scientific and health authorities from all regions of the Alps Adria Working Community. To determine the necessary steps in achieving this aim, a committee was elected (D. Dekaris, Croatia; K. Nekam, Hungary; F. Tedesco, Italy; G. Titz, Austria and H. Wekerle, Germany). The Committee succeeded in lobbying for the inclusion of "the Alps Adria co-operation in the field of immunology" in the agenda of the 4th Commission (Science and Technological Co-operation) of the Alps Adria Working Community.

## **Mechanisms in Local Immunity: Changing the Profile**

The Scientific Committee decided to hold the Second Alps-Adria Meeting within the next two or three years. However, the war against Croatia prevented these activities.

In 1993, when the situation in the region stabilized, we started with the preparations for the next meeting. From the correspondence with the colleagues, invited speakers and organizers of the symposia and workshops at the first meeting, we learned that the first meeting had made a significant impact on the international scientific community. However, the interest in the organization of a general type meeting covering all fields of immunology was much lower than we expected. This prompted us to work on a meeting with a more specific and recognizable profile.

The review of immunology meetings in the world and our basic research interests, helped us in determining the mechanisms in local immunity as the main topic of the next meeting in Opatija. A general outline of the scientific program was prepared and a panel of 45 invited speakers and session chairmen, outstanding immunologists from all over the world, was formed by D. Rukavina and Thomas J. Gill III (president of the International Society for Immunology of Reproduction), in collaboration with other colleagues (D. Dekaris, Zagreb; Eckhard R. Podack, Miami; J. Wayne Streilein, Boston; Hartmuth Wekerle, Martinsried; Gyözö Petrányi, Budapest). In this way, the meeting began to outgrow the Alps Adria region and became even more international. The official name of the meeting was "Mechanisms in Local Immunity". This project was recognized and sponsored as an official meeting by the European Federation of Immunological Societies and the International Society for Immunology of Reproduction. The Alps-Adria Working Community proclaimed this meeting as the Second Alps-Adria Immunology and Allergology Meeting.

The meeting was organized in nine symposia covering both experimental and clinical aspects of local immunity. After the evaluation of abstracts submitted by the participants, the best seventeen contributions were selected for short oral presentations, and the rest were discussed in eight workshops.

The contributions of invited speakers and authors selected for oral presentations, altogether 35 articles, were published in a regular issue of the journal *Regional Immunology* (Vol. 6, No. 5-6, 1994, pp. 285-460) after a peer-review. In that way the results and concepts presented at the meeting became available to the scientific community.

During the meeting, (September 26, 1994; Opatija) the Alps Adria Society for Immunology of Reproduction (AASIR) was founded as an affiliated society to the International Society for Immunology of Reproduction (ISIR). Altogether, 36 scientists from the Alps Adria countries and regions and four from other countries were the founder-members. The Council of the AASIR was elected for the period from 1994-1997, with Rijeka as the head office, and D. Rukavina as its president. Franco Dondero (Rome) was elected as the president for the period from 1997-2000, and Rome as the head office. Today, AASIR is one of the most active European groups in reproductive immunology. The Council of ISIR, at its meeting during the 6th International Congress of Reproductive Immunology, in Washington (July 19-23, 1995), accepted the proposal of AASIR to organize the Eight International Congress of Reproductive Immunology in Opatija in 2001.

The next Opatija meeting was organized as the Third International Meeting "Mechanisms in Local Immunity" (September 25-28, 1996). The organizers were the Alps-Adria Society for Immunology of Reproduction, the Croatian Immunological Society, and the School of Medicine of the University of Rijeka. Since reproductive immunology was significantly represented at both meetings, in 1990 and 1994, the Third Meeting of Alps Adria Society for Immunology of Reproduction was organized jointly with the meeting "Mechanisms in Local Immunity". On September 25, the Croatian Immunological Society organized its 1996 Annual Meeting, as a joint meeting as well, thereby facilitating contacts between Croatian basic and clinical immunologists and colleagues from abroad.

The meeting was organized in plenary sessions. Nine symposia with 40 invited speakers covered the fields of reproductive immunology and immunopathology, AIDS in pregnancy, neuroimmunology, immunology of the respiratory and gastrointestinal systems and immunology of the eye. Thirty three

contributions were selected for short oral presentation, and the rest were discussed in workshops. Seventeen contributions of invited speakers from the field of reproductive immunology were prepared for publication in a special issue of the American Journal of Reproductive Immunology. Twenty three contributions of invited speakers and selected oral presentations from other fields were published in *Periodicum Biologorum*, after a peer-review (Vol. 98., No. 4, pp. 258-378, 1996). We hope that this will also contribute to further international recognition of *Periodicum Biologorum*.

### **1998 Opatija Meeting**

In March 1996, six months before the Third Meeting, the Alps Adria Society for Immunology of Reproduction formed the Program Committee for the Fourth International Meeting "Mechanisms in Local Immunity" which will be held in Opatija, September 16-19, 1998. The Fourth Meeting of the Alps Adria Society for Immunology of Reproduction will be held as a joint meeting. The general outline of the program was discussed during the meeting of the AASIR Council in Opatija. The Fourth International Meeting "Mechanisms in Local Immunity" will have at least eleven symposia. The organizers of the symposia were elected as well (see the preliminary program accompanying this article). The scientific program of the fourth meeting will proceed with the basic concept of presenting mechanisms operating locally in various systems, and will try to connect the Society for Mucosal Immunology with the Opatija meetings as close as possible. We are convinced that these activities will be fruitful and will assure the position of the Opatija meetings as one of very few occasions where scientists interested in various fields of local immunity can meet and contribute to the progress of this fascinating field of contemporary immunology.

### **Instead of a Conclusion**

During the past seven years the immunology meetings in Opatija have gained a considerable scientific importance and become a well-recognized means of bringing together immunologists from the Alps-Adria region, other parts of Europe and the United States. These interactions have helped the development of both mucosal immunology and reproductive immunology. Publication of the meetings' proceedings has further enhanced their impact. The Alps-Adria Society for Immunology of Reproduction has rapidly become the most effective and best recognized society for reproductive immunology in Europe, and its impact has been recognized all around the world.

These developments have served an even broader purpose than the exchange of scientific information. They have brought together a diverse group of researchers whose interactions have led to many new research collaborations and the exchange of both faculty and students. These interactions have contributed to a considerable progress in the presentation of Croatian biomedical science, particularly immunology, in Europe and beyond. They will also help in regaining a prominent position for *Periodicum Biologorum*, which boasts 110 years of publication. Since science is a well-recognized component of human culture throughout the world, its continuous growth and development in Croatia is crucial for the recognition and esteem of the nation.

### **Acknowledgments**

We thank Mrs Ivana Godnic for excellent administrative assistance to the Immunology Meetings.

Daniel Rukavina was President of the Organizing Committee at the First (1990) and Second (1994) Meetings and Co-President of the Scientific and Organizing Committee at the Third Meeting (1996).

Thomas J. Gill III was President of the Scientific Committee at the Second Meeting (1994) and Co-President of the Scientific and Organizing Committee at the Third Meeting (1996).

**Preliminary Program for  
The Fourth International Meeting “Mechanisms in Local Immunity”**

**Opatija, September 16-19, 1998**

SYMPOSIA AND THEIR ORGANIZERS:

· *Mechanisms of cytotoxicity and apoptosis*  
Eckhard R. Podack (Miami, FL, USA)

· *Basic aspects of mucosal immunity*  
Charles R. Wira (Lebanon, NH, USA)

· *Immunology of the gastrointestinal system*  
Christopher R. Stokes (Bristol, UK)

· *Immunology of the CNS*  
Uwe G. Liebert (Leipzig, Germany)

· *Immunology of the respiratory system*  
Hans D. Flad (Borstel/Lübeck, Germany)

· *Immunogenetics of reproduction*  
Thomas J. Gill III (Pittsburgh, PA, USA)

· *Immunobiology of reproduction*  
Daniel Rukavina (Rijeka, Croatia)

· *The role of NK cells in reproduction*  
Gerard Chaouat (Paris, France)

· *Immunopathology of early pregnancy*  
David A. Clark (Hamilton, Canada)

· *Mucosal immunology of sexually transmitted diseases*  
Jiri Mestecky (Birmingham, AL, USA)

· *Local immunity against HIV: Implications on  
heterosexual and vertical transmission of HIV-1:*  
Françoise Barré-Sinoussi (Paris, France)

**Correspondence to:**

Dr Daniel Rukavina  
Department of Physiology and Immunology  
School of Medicine, University of Rijeka  
B. Branchetta 20  
Croatia  
51000 Rijeka