

“Not searching for paradise, but finding a treasure”

Report from the 6th General Assembly of the World Association of Croatian Physicians (WACP), Dubrovnik, Croatia, April 13-15, 2000

The World Association of Croatian Physicians (WACP) is a professional association assembling physicians of the Croatian origin who live and work abroad. It was founded in 1991, in times of the greatest war sufferings and destruction of Croatia, and played a historically prominent role with its noble humanitarian, medical, and diplomatic deeds. Former WACP assemblies were held first in Frankfurt in 1992, when the Croatian Medical Journal became the official journal of the WACP, then in Zagreb (1993), Pula (1994), Osijek (1995), and Opatija (1997). This one, the sixth General Assembly of the WACP, was held in Dubrovnik, April 13-15, 2000.

Day One

Dubrovnik is a beautiful town; it was not by chance that George Bernard Shaw once said: “Those seeking earthly paradise should come and see Dubrovnik”. But, during my 13-hour bus trip from Zagreb to Dubrovnik, I did not think as much about the town I had become enamored with during my vacation there a few years ago, as about the forthcoming WACP Assembly, the first I was going to attend. Thumbing through the Assembly program, where a number of interesting topics and names of respectable lecturers from all over the world were listed, I was curious, excited, and very proud of myself for having the opportunity to present the study I did with my colleagues during our student days.

I arrived in Dubrovnik early Thursday morning, on the day of the Assembly opening. A large and heavy package of books that I had with me was my first and foremost problem. These were the copies of the Chronicles of the World Association of Croatian Physicians 1991-1997, that have been printed in Zagreb and now sent to fellow WACP members.

In addition to the heavy package and embarrassing accident with my pet mobile phone that slipped out of my pocket and broke into pieces, I had to walk quite a distance to the Hotel Excelsior, the meeting venue: to save money, since I had my room reserved in an inexpensive hotel a bit far from the Hotel Excelsior. Short of breath and full of sweat, I was happy to hand the package over to the Assembly organizers, so the copies could be put together with books brought by other colleagues. After that, I had the pleasure to take my seat and listen to the lectures.

Dr Rajko Ostojčić, Deputy Minister of Health of the Republic of Croatia; Professor Dubravko Orlić, President of the Croatian Medical Association (CMA); Professor Ivo Bačić, President of the WACP; Professor Goran Knežević, President of the Croatian Society of Dental Medicine of CMA; Dr Vladimir Martinović, President of the Switzerland Medical Section of the Almae Matris Alumni Croaticae (AMAC); Mr Ivan Šprlje, Head of the Dubrovnik-Neretva County; and Dr Delon Human, on behalf of the World Medical Association, delivered their welcoming address at the opening ceremony.

The book, Chronicles of the World Association of Croatian Physicians 1991-1997, was presented by Professor Žarko Dolinar from Switzerland. This precious book is a historical testimony of the time, describing the impressive work of WACP and offering data on various aspects of aid the Association provided. Original documents, written in three languages – Croatian, German, and English – were compiled and edited by the founders of the Association: Ivo Bačić, Ivan Bokan, Valentin Barko, Matko Marušić, and Drago Novak.

Dr Rajko Ostojčić, Deputy Minister of Health of the Republic of Croatia, gave an overview of the present health situation in Croatia. After him, Professor Zvonko Rumboldt, Dean of the Split University School of Medicine, lectured on diagnostic and therapeutic procedures in medicine; Professor Žarko Dolinar, talked about the progress in mapping the complete human genome; and Dr Boris Bill from Germany, gave an informative lecture on helicopter emergency medical service. Endocrinology and gastroenterology were the topics of the series of interesting lectures that followed afterwards. First, Dr Krešimira Milas from Atlanta, USA, talked about progress in sarcoma gene-based therapy. Then, Professor Željko Metelko from Zagreb, gave a very educative speech on the Croatian model of diabetic patient health care. After Professor H. Holzhüter from Bremen, Germany, who informed us on the new principles in the treatment of HIV/AIDS, three excellent lecturers followed: Professor Zdravko R. Vlahović from Richmond, USA, who talked about bile acid metabolism and bile stones in general; Professor Juraj Osterman from Columbia, USA, who described several ACTH disorders; and Professor Velimir A. C. Luketić from Richmond, USA, who delivered a lecture about viral hepatitis following liver transplantation.

Lunch break gave me the opportunity to meet old friends and acquaintances, and to make new ones. I met Dr Josip Bill and Dr Ivan Bokan from Germany, both friendly, competent, and very active

secretaries of WACP. They were in the company of Dr Bill's charming Dr Astrid Berden and Dr Boris Bill, Josip's brother. Then, there were Professor Ivo Baæa from Germany, the president and spiritus movens of WACP, Professor Juraj Osterman from USA, and many others. I met Klaudija Tomaševiaæ, a student of dental medicine from Germany, and Sanja Tomac, a colleague of mine whom I had not seen for quite a long time. Time flew by, and soon, a new series of lectures started. Unfortunately, the attendance to the Assembly was not really big; more physicians should have come, especially from Croatia. Some possible reasons for that were inappropriate timing; 3-year interval between the last two meetings (the present Assembly had been planned for Dubrovnik in 1999 but had to be postponed because of NATO's intervention in Yugoslavia); inadequate level of information among Croatian physicians. Of course, warm, sunny weather and beauties of Dubrovnik probably could also be accounted for crowds in the lecture halls to be even smaller. However, the lectures were interesting, diverse, and instructive, delivered by professionals from Croatia and abroad. The afternoon section on oncology started with a lecture delivered by Dr Ivan Djikiæ from Sweden, about intercellular signal pathways and tumor development. After him, Professor Asim Kurjak from Zagreb, talked about the assessment of tumor angiogenesis by three-dimensional power Doppler. Finally, Dr Miroslav Kopjar from Zabok, Croatia, gave a rather educative video presentation of laparoscopic hysterectomy.

The evening started with a very pleasant social event – a delicious fish dinner in the restaurant Atlas Club Nautika. I joined the company that was in a good mood predominately for Professor Ivica Klapan's great sense of humor. Medically conscientious, after dinner, I went to my hotel room to prepare for my next-day presentation.

Day Two

I woke up at 6.30 a.m., before the wake-up call, with no desire for breakfast because of my talk scheduled for that afternoon. The Assembly proceeded as planned, excellent lectures followed one after another. In the section on rehabilitation, anesthesiology, and surgery, Professor Darko Ekl from Rijeka described Croatian experience with percutaneous tracheostomy. Then, Dr Jerko Usmiani from Germany, talked about laparoscopy in diagnostics and therapy of abdomen contusion; Dr Marko Erceg from New York, USA, described neuropsychological differences between the right and the left hemisphere after brain damage; Dr Leonardo Patrlj from Zagreb, presented the first experiences of liver transplantation in Croatia; and Dr Nikica Gabriæ, also from Zagreb, talked about cornea transplantation in Croatia. I especially liked the extraordinary documentary film on the 50 years of the Children's Hospital in Zagreb, directed by Mr Petar Krelja and presented as video-record by Dr Ivan Fattorini, Head of the Hospital. The authentic life stories of the children and young people treated at the Children's Hospital deeply moved the audience. After this, Professor Antun Tucak, Dean of the Osijek University School of Medicine, presented awards and certificates to the WACP members on the occasion of the 125th anniversary of the CMA Osijek Branch. Dr Berislav Tomac spoke about the problems encountered by private medical practice in Croatia. My presentation, Paying tuition and its impact to students' success at the Zagreb University School of Medicine, was among the last before lunch, followed by the presentation of Klaudija Tomaševiaæ, a student of dental medicine, who described her experience gained during the studies in Sweden.

The dental medicine section of the Assembly was simultaneously held in another hall. Professor Goran Kneževiaæ from Zagreb, talked about recognizing hyperparathyroidism in dental practice; Dr Josip Bill from Würzburg, Germany, presented functional and esthetic aspects of orthodontic surgery; Professor Maida Ganibegoviaæ-Selimoviaæ from Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, talked about pediatric dentistry; Professor Ksenija Jorgiaæ-Srdljak from Zagreb, described various treatment approaches to mucogingival disturbances; Associate Professor Darije Planèak from Zagreb, presented therapeutical possibilities after the damage to the root branchings; and Dr Ivan Bokan from Verden, Germany, spoke about surgical therapy of parodontitis at the turn of the millennium. During the lunch break, I had an opportunity to talk to Professor Źarko Dolinar, a remarkable physician and person. In his younger days he won gold, silver, and bronze medals at world championships in table tennis, and was declared one of the sportsmen of the century in Croatia. As a signature collector, he collected about 75,000 signatures of famous persons, including copies of Mozart's, Wagner's, Churchill's, Hitler's, Stalin's, Reagan's, Greta Garbo's, Elvis Presley's, and many others – it is probably the largest private signature collection in the world. Professor Dolinar also has a great collection of paintings and other works of art. On top of this, he made a very successful academic career as a teacher and scientist in Basle, Switzerland, and as *venia docendi* lecturer at five universities worldwide.

After lunch break, the work of the Assembly continued with the second part of the section on rehabilitation, anesthesiology and surgery. First, Professor Dubravko Orliæ from Zagreb, delivered a lecture on endoprosthesis in the treatment of diseases and injuries of hip joint. He was followed by Dr

Ivo Batory from Switzerland, who spoke about endoprosthesis of the hip joint in general; Associate Professor Vedran Uglešić from Zagreb, described reconstructive surgery of the face, jaw, and mouth; and Professor Ivica Klapan from Zagreb presented impressive tele-3D-computer-assisted functional endoscopic sinus surgery. Dr Josip Bill from Würzburg, Germany, who is a maxillofacial surgeon and doctor of dental medicine, had his second lecture about differential indication of contemporary techniques in face and jaw reconstruction. Dr Spomenka Tomek-Roksandić from Zagreb talked about health care of the elderly as the main indicator of the health care of the total population; Professor Branko Tomazić from Columbia, USA, presented physicochemical aspects of cardiovascular calcification; and Dr Mladen Markota from Ljubljana, Slovenia, described influence of political transition to the health, as experienced by some middle European countries.

WACP Elections and Foundation of the WACP Section for Students and Young Physicians

On Friday afternoon, Professor Ivo Bašić, president of the WACP, gave the report on the WACP activities. After that, he, Dr Ivan Bokan, and Dr Josip Bill were reappointed as the WACP executives. Professor Antun Tucak from Osijek became a new member of the WACP Presidency, with the aim to promote collaboration with the physicians from Croatia. It was agreed that the next WACP Assembly should be held in two years, most likely in Krapinske Toplice, with Dr Miroslav Kopjar as a coordinator. Awarding scholarships for medical students and further guidelines for WACP activities were also discussed. As reported by Dr Berislav Tomac, the WACP has awarded scholarships to medical students over the years. However, due to the limited funds, not many students have been awarded such scholarships, and because of a large number of unemployed physicians in Croatia, the additional training of young physicians would be a more justifiable form of assistance.

During the session, the WACP Section for Students and Young Physicians was founded. The Section is open to all students and physicians until completion of their residency. The main objectives of the Section include assistance in the organization of student and junior professional exchange and training; establishment of contacts between medical students and young physicians from different countries all over the world; helping and participating in other WACP activities; and popularization of the Croatian Medical Journal, especially among junior medical professionals. Beside being the official journal of WACP, the Croatian Medical Journal is the only medical periodical in Croatia that has been indexed in the most selective bibliographic databases. Following the model of the highly reputable international general medicine journals, such as British Medical Journal (BMJ) or Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), which publish Student BMJ and Medical Student JAMA, Croatian Medical Journal will yearly publish, within its regular issues, a section for medical students with articles on education and other student issues contributed by students and young physicians. In this way, the journal will support and stimulate the scientific work among young generation and at the same time broaden the circle of its readers and subscribers. The activity of the WACP Section for Students and Young Physicians will also be very important in this field, thus acquiring a potent medium for intellectual collaboration at the professional, scientific, and educational level.

Farewell Gala Dinner

The Assembly finished with gala dinner in the beautiful Hotel Excelsior. It was another opportunity to make new friends and acquaintances from all over the world. Mediterranean cuisine and delicious wine added to the cheerful atmosphere, along with a Dubrovnik singing group which performed a potpourri of songs from all Croatian regions, until we finally all sang together. *Viribus unitis*, as Professor Dolinar would say. Unfortunately, I could not go on a trip to Ston, on Saturday, because I had my bus seat reserved for another round of 13 hours on the way home. The trip home gave me time to think about Dubrovnik again.

No, I did not go to Dubrovnik in search for earthly paradise. I arrived in that town, which I knew and loved, looking forward to my active participation in the work of a large congress I had been so curious about. I did find a kind of paradise there – a huge intellectual, medical, and human treasure in the physicians of Croatian origin who live and work abroad, and who open-heartedly offer us their friendly hands. Intellectual potential of the WACP was evident in each part of this Assembly, including numerous educative and interesting lectures in various fields of medicine. There are vast possibilities of professional and scientific collaboration that will certainly lead, directly or indirectly, to the improvement and promotion of the Croatian medical knowledge as a whole.

Dražan Pulanić