

THE FIRST TEN YEARS OF FEBS: RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

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A decade is, of course, too short a period for a thorough assessment of the significance and achievements of an organization like FEBS and in any case such a study should be undertaken by someone not too closely involved in its day to day affairs and therefore able to take a detached view. The 10th anniversary of FEBS is, however, an appropriate occasion to review its present activities and to discuss future developments.

Looking back at the time immediately preceding the foundation of FEBS I still remember vividly the enthusiasm which was generated everywhere by the idea of setting up an organization to promote cooperation among European biochemists. The time was clearly opportune for the initiative taken by W.J. Whelan in arranging first the preparatory meeting of delegates in Oxford in July 1963 and then the first Council meeting in London on 22 March 1964. As Meetings Secretary of The Biochemical Society I was not at that time actively involved in FEBS affairs though I attended various meetings as an observer. It was a unique opportunity to watch an international scientific organization take shape at an incredible pace under the dynamic influence of Bill Whelan who seemed to have in great measure the indispensable gift of obtaining agreement on a number of important ideas and proposals concerning FEBS activities, as well as ensuring that decisions once made would be implemented efficiently. The fact that within four years of the foundation of FEBS it was possible to publish two major biochemical journals gives a good indication of the pace at which new developments were being carried out. What is perhaps equally remarkable is that at that time FEBS had practically no financial resources of its own and indeed in the original statutes there is no mention of any membership subscription or other funds to be used for running the Federation. Since it was originally planned that the Federation would be

administered in turn by the different constituent societies responsible for organizing the FEBS meetings it was envisaged that any profits accruing from the annual FEBS meeting would be used by the host society to defray the administrative expenses. With the acceptance at the second Council meeting of a proposal to appoint a Secretary-General, and later a Treasurer, for a three-year term of office, a somewhat more permanent administration came into being and it was decided that constituent societies would pay a membership fee on the basis of 5p/member, which was increased to 10p in 1967. The total income of FEBS from this source was, however, still less than £1000, a very modest sum for an organization soon to encompass essentially the whole of Europe.

Whilst Bill Whelan was heavily engaged in setting up the initial FEBS organization and discussing the arrangements for publishing the *European Journal of Biochemistry*, I mentioned to him one day a proposal that FEBS should organize summer schools, which might serve not only to give advanced instruction in new techniques and other developments but also to bring together young biochemists from all over Europe and thus encourage future cooperation. Without hesitation he thought this seemed a good idea and that I should get on with it. The suggestion was, therefore, considered further at an informal meeting of FEBS delegates in New York in July 1964 and subsequently approved at the Vienna meeting in April 1965. In New York it was suggested that Christian de Duve should be asked to organize the first course in Louvain and I think it was Claude Liébecq who offered to make the initial approach. Since FEBS had no funds to support such a venture it was evident that each school would have to be financially self-supporting. In retrospect it seems to me that it was slightly crazy to start a new activity of this kind without any financial backing,

but such was the momentum of FEBS and the goodwill of the organizers that the idea of a school not succeeding and giving rise to a serious deficit simply did not loom very large in our discussions. In fact, the first summer school was held on 8–18 June 1965, that is less than a year after the proposal was first made.

It became my task, as Chairman of the newly set up FEBS Summer Schools Committee, to seek financial support and it is a pleasure to acknowledge the helpful response of a number of individuals and organizations. Through the good offices of Dr. A. Kepes in Paris ICRO was persuaded to make a substantial financial contribution to the cost of the Louvain course. Later, support was received from EMBO for several summer schools including a course in Uppsala on 'The separation and fractionation of macromolecules and particles', which is still held, though now entirely under the auspices of EMBO. Other organizations which supported early summer schools included the British Council, the Royal Society and the Council of Europe.

Although all these contributions were very welcome and indeed of great importance, it was time-consuming to negotiate financial support separately for each course. Moreover, usually course organizers had to start planning the programme without knowing whether FEBS would be able to obtain any funds. Sometimes course organizers themselves were able to negotiate local financial support, but the burden of being responsible for both the scientific and the financial organization was more than one could continue to ask of organizers. I should like, however, to acknowledge their willingness to help FEBS in this way. By the time I succeeded Bill Whelan as Secretary-General in 1967 and Peter Campbell became Chairman of the Summer Schools Committee there was the expectation that one day FEBS would have an independent income from its publications. Council readily agreed in principle that some of these funds would be allocated to the summer schools programme, but it was clear that the immediate problem could not be solved in this way. Fortunately, with the help of Theodor Bücher and Otto Westphal a successful approach was made to the Volkswagenstiftung who generously provided a grant of DM 50,000 in 1968 and subsequently a further grant of DM 100,000 which successfully bridged the gap until it became possible to provide support from FEBS funds.

Under Peter Campbell's chairmanship of the Summer Schools Committee the number of summer schools increased from two each in 1966 and 1967 to usually four per year. Also, at his suggestion Summer Schools were renamed Advanced Courses, mainly because this description indicated more clearly that the courses were meant to be for postdoctoral biochemists and intending participants would thus find it easier to obtain travel grants from universities and other institutions. A second, though more trivial point was that in fact some courses had been held during winter months and, except for the poetic view of an eternal FEBS summer, the new name would therefore be more appropriate.

In 1970, Max Gruber became chairman of the Advanced Courses Committee and continued to arrange a very successful programme. Many different topics have been covered by the 26 courses* that have been held since the beginning of the scheme and altogether several hundred biochemists from all FEBS countries have taken part. Now that FEBS has an independent income from *FEBS Letters* and the *European Journal of Biochemistry* it has been possible not only to subsidize advanced courses, but also to set up a FEBS Youth Travel Fund which provides individual grants to young biochemists attending FEBS Advanced Courses to help meet the ever-increasing travelling costs.

It was inevitable that the initial burst of activity in setting up FEBS and organizing the various major undertakings in the fields of charter travel, meetings, publications and summer schools would be followed by a period during which these activities would need to be fully developed and become firmly established. Although the second half of the first decade may thus be regarded as a time of consolidation, a number of new developments have in fact taken place during these years. Thus, a hospitality scheme for visits by children of members and the exchange of houses or apartments for a limited period was started in 1967. A scheme for exchanging laboratory protocols was originally organized by R. Crokaert in 1969 and again in 1972 and is now being continued by IUB under the aegis of *Biochemical Education*. More recently, an experimental scheme for the exchange of information on the teaching of biochemistry at the graduate level

* Details on p. S172.

has been initiated by Giorgio Semenza at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule, Zürich.

A number of developments that have been made possible through the generosity of various benefactors deserve special mention. A donation from the Lord Rank Research Centre has been used to finance the Sir Hans Krebs Lecture which has been given since 1968 as one of the plenary lectures at the annual FEBS meetings. More recently, the publishers of the *European Journal of Biochemistry*, Springer-Verlag, have endowed an annual FEBS-Ferdinand Springer Lecture. Under this scheme, the lecturer visits at least two different FEBS countries, local arrangements for the lecture tour being the responsibility of the host society. Lastly, as from this year generous support from Eppendorf Gerätebau Netheler + Hinz GmbH and Boehringer Mannheim GmbH will enable FEBS to award Anniversary Prizes to two symposium contributors at annual FEBS meetings.

Of the major activities the regular FEBS meetings continue to provide the main opportunity for European biochemists to get together. In general, they have followed the established pattern but their size has been increasing steadily, and they are now as large as early International Congresses. Although it has been FEBS policy not to arrange the annual FEBS meeting in a year when an IUB Congress is held in Europe, a special FEBS meeting on Industrial Aspects of Biochemistry was organized in Dublin last year as an experiment. This was a smaller and more specialized meeting and its success may encourage other similar meetings.

The host societies continue to have sole responsibility for organizing the annual meetings. This seems to me to be a highly desirable arrangement since local conditions vary so much that it is inconceivable that any central organization could do the job, unless the meetings were to be held in the same one or two places year after year. The suggestion has been made that this would be efficient and reduce the vast amount of preparatory work that is now done by the organizing committee of the host society. A major disadvantage, however, would be that such an arrangement would give rise to a stereotyped kind of meeting whereas one of the most stimulating aspects of the present system is the diversity of places where FEBS meetings have been or will be held and the freshness and enthusiasm with which each one is organized.

When one considers the size of FEBS meetings and

all the problems involved in their organization it is remarkable how few serious difficulties there have been. Even though we live in troubled times the only occasion when a FEBS meeting came near to being in jeopardy was in 1969 when some of the universities in Spain were closed and the question was raised whether the meeting in Madrid should be held as planned. In the event, the meeting took place and was most successful. I believe the experience of dealing with this crisis ultimately strengthened FEBS and incidentally established useful general criteria for judging the practicability of holding international meetings in delicate political conditions (see *Nature* (1969) 221, 794).

As regards the publication of symposia arising from meetings, it was reaffirmed in 1972 that each society was free to make its own arrangements with publishers. Although the possibility of FEBS setting up its own publishing house has been discussed, there seems to be little advantage at present in pursuing this idea, particularly in view of the difficulties experienced by many scientific periodicals in maintaining their circulation. Indeed, considering these circumstances it is clear that both the *European Journal of Biochemistry* and *FEBS Letters* have done exceptionally well to become established as major biochemical journals during difficult times and their editors deserve the highest praise for the success of their efforts. A recent development has been the publication last year of an *Index of Biochemical Reviews* as a special *FEBS Letters* supplement and it is hoped that this will be continued annually.

Mention should also be made here of the *FEBS Bulletin* produced twice yearly by Prakash Datta, who incidentally also prepares the Information Sheet now under IUB auspices. These publications are significant, for together with the circulars from the FEBS officers they provide important channels of communication with FEBS societies and through them with individual members.

Over the years, relations with several other international bodies have steadily improved and there is now excellent cooperation between FEBS, IUB and PAABS. Also, FEBS is represented on the board of the European Cell Biology Organization (ECBO) and contact has been made with the newly created Federation of Asian and Oceanic Biochemists (FAOB). There is no doubt that effective collaboration between the various

international organizations interested in biochemistry and allied fields is highly desirable. An important step in this direction would be to establish closer cooperation with the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO), with which in the past there has been only sporadic contact.

As time goes on and FEBS activities expand, the administrative burden will inevitably increase. At the moment, a small Executive Committee consisting of six officers has overall responsibility for FEBS between Council meetings, but the various activities I have described are organized on a decentralized basis. These arrangements have the advantage of being highly flexible and keeping the administrative costs extremely low. Whereas a permanent FEBS secretariat might be convenient, it would be expensive and not necessarily more efficient. For these reasons, I think it would be a mistake to set up a permanent office but provision should be made in future for increased secretarial assistance to individual officers.

At one time there was some criticism that a small Executive Committee is inevitably not fully representative. A proposal to increase the membership to eight by the election of two additional members by FEBS Council was informally discussed, but subsequently not pursued. In my opinion, such a development would have many advantages, not least the opportunity of giving more people experience of organizing some of the FEBS activities whilst at the same time relieving the officers of a certain amount of the administrative work.

By the end of the first decade, nearly all the European biochemical societies, comprising some 18,000 biochemists, have become members of FEBS, the last to join being that of Iceland. The present Statutes* were adopted at the tenth Council meeting in Zürich in 1970 after a number of alterations during the early years. At the same time, the tax position of FEBS was satisfactorily sorted out and the objects of FEBS are

now officially recognized as scientific and non-profit making. For better or for worse the innocence of the original statutes concerning financial matters has disappeared and a central fund, composed of membership fees, royalties and other income is defined in Statute 6. Even so the Statutes remain but ten in number, and are brief as well as simple. FEBS has not succumbed to bureaucracy and its objects remain unchanged, namely 'to advance research and education in the science of biochemistry to hold and arrange instructional courses to facilitate the exchange of scientific information between biochemists generally and especially European biochemists by the holding of meetings and discussions and by other appropriate means'.

Much progress has been made towards achieving these objects, but I think that there is room for improvement. Thus, there is still relatively little contact with some societies and the extent to which different constituent societies are keen to play an active part in FEBS varies greatly. It would be helpful if societies would suggest ideas more often, for example for advanced courses or other activities.

The past ten years do not appear to have diminished the need for FEBS nor has the original enthusiasm vanished. As an organization it is now firmly established and widely respected and the future prospects are bright.

Throughout the time I have been associated with FEBS Prakash Datta has been a constant source of strength with his tremendous keenness and wise counsel. FEBS is indeed fortunate in having him as treasurer. For me, personally, the years in FEBS have been exhilarating and enjoyable, above all because of the opportunities of meeting and working with so many colleagues, from all the different societies, whose friendship I shall always value highly.

London, 5 February 1974.

* p. S170–S171.