

MSSA PRESIDENT'S REPORT – NOVEMBER 2006

In 2006 I have had the support of an outstanding executive committee which included both longstanding exco stalwarts and new additions. It has been wonderful to have the ever-reliable and efficient John Soley and Alan Hall; the experience and energy of Jan Neethling; and the fresh ideas of Alistair Douglas, Dave Perret and James Wesley-Smith. Sadly, Miemie Nzula resigned from the committee when she joined the financial sector – no electron microscopes at Rand Merchant Bank! – and we missed her input in the second half of the year. Overall, 2006 has been a year full of exciting plans and developments for MSSA, which means we have a couple of exciting years ahead.

MSSA is a society which thrives on the members' input and ideas, so new developments are largely driven by the membership. Communication is a vital part of an interactive society: the MSSA listserver provides a vehicle for this, thanks to the ongoing efforts of Trevor Sewell. Tony Bruton has also contributed by producing the MSSA newsletter and using it to stimulate debate. Luc Harmsen is also to be thanked for stimulating (or provoking) debate, and for maintaining the MSSA website with dedication and irreverence.

A suggestion was received from the membership some time ago that MSSA should not restrict invited speakers to scientists from outside Southern Africa. Since those who are invited to deliver the Boris Balinsky and Jon Matthews lectures are eminent scientists who are also microscopists, the challenge is to invite a world-class South African scientist who is also a microscopist. I am delighted that in 2006 we have fulfilled this item from the wish-list, by securing the presence of Professor Anusuya Chinsamy-Turan, an eminent paleobiologist, to present the 22nd Boris Balinsky lecture. I am sure that this will be a successful move; by now you will have had an opportunity to judge for yourselves.

By now most members will know that 2008 will see the MSSA conference held outside the borders of South Africa for the first time, at the University of Botswana. This is a manifestation of our wish live up to our name as the Microscopy Society of Southern Africa, and to grow regionally as well as nationally. An enormous amount of effort has already been put into MSSA 2008 by the Botswana team, ably led by Stephan Coetzee. Organising a conference remote from the usual MSSA environment is a great challenge, which I am sure that MSSA can meet. I know that the members who are involved will do everything possible to make MSSA 2008 a huge success; but ALL our members can contribute simply by planning to be there! Let's make this the biggest MSSA conference ever.

The timing and the frequency of the MSSA conferences have been the subject of ongoing discussion in the society, with some preference for a non-December, non-annual conference expressed. A survey in 2005 revealed that most members were happy with the status quo. Nevertheless the offer from the University of Botswana to host the conference at mid-year in 2008 provides us with an opportunity to test the waters by having a July conference, and having an inter-conference interval of 18 months. The plan at present is to follow this with another 18-month interval, with the 2009 conference held in December again to bring us back to our usual pattern.

Nevertheless we may find that the longer interval, or the midyear conference, is such a success that we change our conference planning in the long term.

MSSA is a society that draws members from both the academic and commercial sectors. I believe that the diverse nature of our membership is a great strength of the society; and would like to seek ways to obtain more input from, and support for, the commercial sector. A survey has been initiated on member's points of view around the trade exhibitions that are held at the MSSA conference. Some of the input and ideas have already been implemented at MSSA 2006; we continue to seek ways to improve. I am delighted that in 2006 Dave Perret served on the MSSA Exco – reviving a practice of having a member of the commercial sector on the committee.

Several MSSA members have been in the news in 2006, notably Pat Berjak who was invested with the Order of Mapungubwe: Silver by President Mbeki. On a lighter (but probably more publicised) note, Miranda Waldron won the Science Lens prize in the Science Close Up category and Andre Botha won the Science as Art category; other members also featured in the winning lineup. I'd like to invite members whose microscopy makes the news to reflect on whether the society played any part in their success. If not, tell us! We can always improve. But if yes, perhaps we could think of ways to use these awards to put MSSA on the map.

The MSSA Proceedings remain our showpiece and are the product of an immense amount of hard work by Trevor Sewell, Tony Bruton, the subject editors and the referees. MSSA seeks to attain a high standard in the Proceedings through stringent refereeing, and I believe we are making good progress in this.

2006 was a year with some sad milestones, including the death of Professor Frank Nabarro, an eminent Honorary Member of the MSSA. Academically active to the end of a long life, Professor Nabarro will remain an inspiration to those who knew him and his work.

As usual, the annual (for now) MSSA conference provides a high point at the end of another busy year. Jan Neethling and his team have laboured hard to put on a great conference for us. I am particularly pleased to see that a student evening has now become a regular part of the conference social programme, underlining our commitment to reach out to postgraduate students and grow our membership. The scientific programme is an exciting one, with four plenary lectures including one in the Technical Forum – not to be missed! Another innovation this year has been the linking of MSSA with the ISO Microbeam Analysis meeting, which South Africa is hosting for the first time. Hopefully that raises the profile of both groups!

Reflecting on my own experience of the society, I have always enjoyed being a member of MSSA, and I have thoroughly enjoyed my two years as MSSA president. 2006 has been a good year.

See you in Botswana!

Candy Lang
President: MSSA
November 2006