

MSSA PRESIDENT'S REPORT – AUGUST 2002

This year has seen the climax to the four years of preparation for the ICEM-15 conference. The beginning of the year brought the nail-biting period of wondering how the events of the past year would affect attendance, of how many abstracts would be submitted, could people get their abstracts in on time? The answer to the later worldwide including South Africa was NO! So no difference to our annual conferences! Thus the deadline was extended. In the end, there were about 1165 abstracts, which in the circumstances is very good. (1145 are in the Proceedings, the late ones will be placed on the conference website for some considerable time after the conference so people can download them.) Then there was the fun of refereeing of abstracts, them being sent to the session chairs around the world. Finally, a week before the conference, 1.6 tons of Proceedings were delivered to Turners Conference from the printers – that must have surprised them! Our thanks go to Robin for his efficient handling of the compiling of the Proceedings and dealing with the Printers (just part of many jobs he had organising this dream), and to the Printers for their speed in producing them – a rather different magnitude of job from their usual printing of our slightly thinner annual Proceedings!

The Local Organising Committee in Durban led by Fiona Graham were splendid attending to all the details and changes in requirements. I had many late night telephone and e-mail conversations with Fiona, in particular during August, as speed became of the essence. I appreciate her tolerance of me, and her humour. There are times when one has to laugh at situations!

There were so many people involved it would be unfair to name some and leave out others. If I named everyone, it would sound like the Oscar ceremony speeches! What I will say is this. The task was immense, bigger than many of us thought at the outset. Just think, many of the people involved had never been to an international conference so had no idea what would be really expected of them. Others that thought they knew, like me, got it wrong! In the event, it is really excellent what we as a team achieved. Have no fear, every contribution was sincerely appreciated no matter how big or small. It is to the credit of everyone that we got there on time, and I express my sincere thanks to all of them for their unselfish, voluntary, unpaid efforts as well as the sacrifices they made to the joint effort. They can be proud of the part they played and the result that was achieved. I hope that they can enjoy at least part of the result of their labours at the conference and be enriched by the whole experience.

I must give a big thanks to the commercial sector for their support of the exhibition and events. Without them, as with our local conferences, this conference would not have happened. We are also grateful to the Mayor and the City of Durban, foreign embassies, commercial organisations, government departments, SAA, microscopy societies around the world for helping to spread news of the conference, as well as the various organisations sponsoring events as well as people, especially students from around the world, to attend the conference. Finally, to the International Federation of Societies for Electron Microscopy (IFSEM) for not only allowing us to host the conference, but also for their faith in us, their support and wisdom at all stages of its preparation. Personally, I would like to thank Professors David Cockayne and Arvid Maunsbach for an immensely productive and breakless 15 hour meeting with us in May in Durban when the conference programme was finally put together.

On behalf of Trevor Sewell and myself as the two scientific programme committee chairpersons, I should like to thank all those people, especially those overseas, who have helped us deciding on the session topics and session chairpersons. I should like to thank the session chairs for their part: nominating invited speakers, refereeing the abstracts, suggesting presentation orders, and then actually coming to chair the sessions. They, as well as the presenters, lead to the success of sessions.

I will leave it to Robin to provide us with a brief summary at the conference AGM, and a more detailed report in due course.

It is a pleasure to receive, from 54 countries, so many overseas microscopists to our country and I hope that everyone will make use of the occasion to learn and to make fruitful contact with them.

The Society was pleased to be able to provide financial support to 5 students to attend this year's conference. Each was awarded R1200.

Looking forward to 2003, the conference returns to its regular December slot. It is scheduled to be held at the University of Cape Town with Candy Lang as the Conference Organiser. I am enthusiastic about returning to such a great location and even spending some holiday time there at the same time. I am sure that it will be a great conference just as previous ones there have been. And, of course, with our annual conference being earlier in the year in 2002, we have longer to carry out the research for next year's MSSA conference abstracts. But think of it this way, if we start on the work now, how much better will our abstracts be next year!

For the fifth year, the Society will be participating in the finals of the National Expo for schools to promote science. Relating to the MSSA involvement, schools were sent brochures inviting students to submit to EXPO 2002 a project using microscopy. Assistance was offered at local Microscopy Units. The best project could win for the student R500, with a further R1000 to be awarded to the winner's school for science development.

Sometime ago, Alan Hall heard that the University of Pretoria was going to dispose of some 45 microscopes used in dissection work, and investigated. The microscopes were subsequently cleaned and donated to MSSA. Ten of the microscopes were donated by us to the Science Centre being set up at the Iqskhumbuzo Comprehensive Secondary School in Orange Farm, an informal settlement of some 350,000 households, south of Johannesburg. A couple of weeks ago, Jan Coetzee, Alan and I went to the school to look at the progress that had been made – there will be a formal presentation later this year or early next year. The school itself is an interesting project. The school was originally an old chicken farm, missing most of its roof, had few windows, and was totally dilapidated. The school started with three toilets that did not work and one water tap. Through the Ikageng Trust and the British Government, the farm is slowly being transformed into a school housing 1500 pupils. It is still very basic. The desks have been donated, electricity is slowly being installed, most of the new roof is in place, but not all classrooms have blackboards yet. It is built in consultation/involvement with the local community. The National Youth Development Trust (NYDT), part of the Ikageng Trust, is the driving force behind the Science Centre, having got donations of old computers from Hewlett Packard etc. (At Meyer is a consultant for both NYDT, Ikageng Trust and the National Expo, and we are using him and his contacts to place the microscopes at schools in a meaningful way.) It was humbling to see the poor facilities compared to what we just take for granted. The students at the school were very enthusiastic about the microscopes. From observing the pupils handling the microscopes, it was clear that some kind of training must be given to the teachers before the microscopes are handed over in order for the project to be meaningful. In addition, if MSSA is to purchase and donate microscopes in the future, as we hope to do, then not only must some instruction be given to the teachers, but very careful consideration must be given to the type of microscope given in relation to school conditions/facilities and their finance; for example, do they have electricity, most will not; if microscopes run on batteries for illumination, can they afford new batteries, probably not.

The MSSA listserv has been well managed as usual by Trevor Sewell at University of Cape Town and I extend our thanks to him for his efforts. This has been a very under utilised discussion facility this year. I can only assume that everyone has been too busy helping with the organisation of ICEM-15 or being too busy getting results to present at the congress to be sending messages. Remember, it is one way to learn about bursaries to attend our conferences, to seek advice from others about microscopy problems etc. And it is free. It only requires you to send a message.

If you wish to log on to the server for the first time, please contact Trevor at:
sewell@uctvms.uct.ac.za

The MSSA website was set up and is kindly maintained by Keith Williams. It contains much useful information on MSSA and its activities. The site is found at:

<http://www.uct.ac.za/depts/emu/mssa/>

Any inaccuracies should be reported to myself (mikew@gecko.biol.wits.ac.za) or the Society Secretary, Alan Hall (ahall@nsnper1.up.ac.za).

I have recently sent Keith some updates to be put on the web, in particular, details about Boris Balinsky (thanks to Elly Grossman) and John Matthews, the two people for which we have annual memorial lectures. In addition, I have passed on the changes needed to various microscopy unit details that I have noticed or they have sent me.

The ICEM-15 website was generously sponsored by Anaspec, thanks Luc. It was well structured, easy to navigate and provided much useful information. And with such a simple, brilliant address, I certainly never forgot it (<http://www.icem15.com>).

The MSSA Newsletter has appeared once this year in March under the editorship of Tony Bruton. He managed to squeeze it in while being busy organising the trade ICEM-15 trade exhibition. Tony will certainly have lots to report on for the next issue! Our thanks go out to him and the sponsor for the March issue, Cambridge University Press. As in previous years, I would encourage members to assist Tony in his job by sending him (bruton@nu.ac.za) any interesting news or research items, as well as reports on conferences they have attended that might be of interest to our members. I would also encourage potential advertisers to contact him regards future issues. It really is a very cheap way of advertising since we only charge what it costs for us to produce and send out it out to our members.

It is a most pleasant task to again thank the commercial sector for their continued backing of our endeavours. This year they have supported us through their attendance at the Durban conference exhibition and their speakers in various sessions. Carl Zeiss have continued the award for the FEI prize for the best paper involving electron microscopy published in an international journal during the past year. This will be awarded at the conference. All the other prizes I hope will return next year. This year the logistics would have been too great.

I should like to thank the Executive Committee for their most valuable, voluntary efforts and support during the year. Special thanks goes to our Vice President, Japie Engelbrecht, who has dealt with ICEM funding applications for the John Matthews speaker as well helped me with the Physical Science Programme. I am appreciative both of his enthusiasm and wit, as well as his willingness to take on tasks. Thanks to Alan Hall, Secretary of the Society, for the subtle way he points out my mistakes, tolerates my occasional lose of memory, and for his efficient management of the Society affairs; to John Soley, Treasurer, for handling so well the financial affairs of MSSA; to Robin Cross for efficiently overseeing the ICEM-15 conference, and his valued advice and constructive thoughts on Society business; to Elly Grossman for as ever keeping us on our toes, her laughter, and for stimulating responses from us on various issues; and to Luc Harmsen for his valuable insight into the commercial section expectations and for actively promoting the Society and the ICEM conference as he jetted to exotic locations around the world sorting out equipment problems and sampling the various local refreshments.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Robin Cross. He has indicated that he does not wish to stand for re-election this year to the Executive Committee of the Society. Robin has annually been voted, by the Society members, onto this Committee for over twenty years during which time he has also been elected to both the Vice President and President positions of the Society. He has given unselfishly of his time and wisdom to the Society. It is through his efforts that the Proceedings of our Conferences have been of pride to the Society. It was through his determination that he secured the successful bid for ICEM-15, something that seemed impossible. And, of course, the result is around us now in the form of a successful conference. I wish him, once the post conference work is over, some time to both relax as well as enjoy research and outside activities again.

I see the Society looking to the coming year with a sense of greater pride in itself and an increased sense of direction. Plans are already being laid to increase our involvement in the community, especially in schools in the disadvantaged community. At this conference, we will be investigating possible avenues of obtaining overseas funding. In tandem with this, we need to look for ways to increase our membership. I would ask all our members to promote the Society especially to students and young members of staff, and to encourage them to join us so that we may gain from them as much as they can potentially benefit from our knowledge.

Mike Witcomb

30 August 2002