

Nineteen years in the service of ICOH



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I had the honour and pleasure to serve as ICOH's (formerly the Permanent Commission and International Association of Occupational Health, PCIAOH, now the International Commission on Occupational Health) President during two periods, from 1987 to 1993. I have been asked to review what happened during these years. However, since all my predecessors have passed away, as well as many other older members, it may be of interest for the present membership to read also a few words about the six years preceding my presidency, during which period I served as the vice president. My seven years as immediate past president from 1993 to 2000 are not included here, because this period is described in Jean-François Caillard's essay.

One could say that my active interest in ICOH's administration began as early as 1978 at the congress in Dubrovnik. (I am using the present abbreviation throughout the text). The then President, Enrico C. Vigliani, suddenly fell ill and could not travel to the congress. In those days the very outdated constitution did not give clear guidelines for who should take the office temporarily, so the past president Leo Noro found himself all of a sudden in charge of the administrative responsibility, totally unprepared and with his health ailing. Reacting to the acute situation, the first General Assembly in Dubrovnik decided to amend the Constitution by establishing a post as Vice President, whose main task would be to preside in case of the inability of the pres-

ident. But because the amendment of the constitution took place at the congress, candidates had not been nominated in advance. The officers automatically supposed that their choice, Luigi Parmeggiani, would become elected unanimously. However, a great number of members did not approve this undemocratic procedure – there was nearly a 'revolution' – and some kind of election was quickly improvised. Minutes before the second General Assembly convened, a small group of people 'attacked' me and asked me to agree to run for vice presidency. I tried to decline, but then the Assembly began and there was no time for negotiations. There was a vote (by raising hands) between me and Luigi Parmeggiani. It must be added that there had been no control of whether only members of ICOH in good standing attended the Assembly, and I saw even several spouses among the public. Luigi Parmeggiani got more hands (I hesitate to use the term 'votes'), which under the prevailing conditions, in spite of the deficient process, probably was good for ICOH because of his close ties with the President, Professor Vigliani. But our rudimentary rules stated that no more than one representative of a single country could serve as an officer! This was ignored.

The Assembly was chaotic also in other respects. For example, Cairo and Los Angeles were candidates for the congress in 1981. When it came to voting, someone proposed a 'test voting' by raising hands to see if there was any reason to arrange a ballot voting. Again, everyone present 'voted', some people even with both hands, and Cairo got such a clear majority that Los Angeles, which is not especially well known for its pyramids, withdrew its candidature. That was when I indeed realized that both ICOH itself and its Constitution must be changed for the organization to survive. I decided to run for some post as officer at the next congress in Cairo, but under the condition that the matter was better prepared.

The Cairo congress took place in September 1981, just two weeks before the murder of President Anwar Sadat. This time there had been proper balloting, and all candidates were backed by the requested number of members. I ran both for the offices of president and vice-president (which was possible under the old rules, but not anymore), and lost the presidential election to Bob Murray, ICOH's long-time secretary-treasurer, as the term was



The Dubrovnik Congress was organized in 1978

in those days, but won over Luigi Parmegiani in the election for Vice-President. He had also run for the post of secretary-treasurer and was unanimously elected. This was the beginning of a very pleasant and fruitful collaboration, in which all the three of us agreed that fundamental changes were absolutely necessary. A special kick came from the Cairo congress. Many participants were of the opinion that the ICOH should seek for better organization and aim at a more ambitious scientific standard. We decided that both administrative and scientific quality had to be improved if the ICOH were to survive.

Bob Murray immediately organized the tasks between us. According to the Constitution the President was and still is rather omnipotent, but he can delegate both specific tasks and responsibility. I got the task to clean up the jungle of scientific committees, activate the dormant ones, and involve them all in the quality control of abstracts for the next congress. As the President Bob naturally had the last word, but in general he agreed to my proposals. These measures included the dissolving of inactive committees – sometimes with no activities for ten years or even ever. This was a painful task but quite necessary. In some other cases the chairman had to be exchanged; also this did hurt many feelings. Some Committees had several members, who were not members of ICOH at all. In some cases, the Committees lived their own, sometimes very active but sometimes dormant lives, without any coordination with ICOH. Correction of this state was often

rather delicate, and it took Bob's considerable diplomatic skills – and a long time – to repair the matter. But we also established several new committees. Another task that I got was to see that the next congress, in Dublin, would live up to decent scientific standards. For example, I visited Dublin three different times, first to agree on what sessions there should be and to define criteria for acceptability of papers, then to plan the programme in more detail, and finally to review, accept, or reject, the abstracts together with the local organizers, after they had been circulated and reviewed by the respective scientific committee. (I remember well how one author reacted angrily after his paper had been rejected, because 'he had presented the same paper already at eight earlier congresses, and none had rejected his excellent contribution'.)

Luigi started to draft a triennial budget, until then an unknown concept in ICOH. He also developed our Newsletter step by step, so that at the end of the triennium it really contained useful information and even looked like a newsletter. And above all, the three of us together started to draft a new constitution and new byelaws. And when I use the word 'new', I really mean it, because we had to start from the very beginning and rewrite everything. In this process the whole ICOH Board got involved. We had a board meeting in Geneva especially for amending the officers' proposal, which then was circulated to all members. Finally it was approved by the first General Assembly in Dublin. It was at this Assembly that the name 'International Commission on Occupational Health' was adopted.

The Dublin congress turned out to be quite acceptable. Our decision to improve the scientific quality could well be seen, but the lecture halls were spread around a horse racing area, with long distances in between and some auditoriums definitely

not built for modern congresses. So when Sydney was elected the venue for 1987 (and Montréal for the 1990 congress), we thought that there were still things to improve. I was again given the task to liaise with the congress organizers, and I traveled twice to Sydney before the congress. During the second trip in January 1987 I again went through the abstracts together with the organizing committee. They decided that each participant could present only one paper in order to prevent abuses. (They called it 'the rule of one'.) There was some point in that, because, for example, one director of an Eastern European national institute had intended to present 27 papers – one may really question if he even knew the contents of all abstracts! One was accepted.

The Sydney congress in September 1987 was very well organized and the time schedules were strictly observed. This was important, because the lectures were given in several different hotels – not an ideal solution, but it worked rather well. The invited keynote lectures were held in the splendid opera house, and they dealt with central topics, such as work injuries, occupational health practices, neurotoxicology, and pregnancy outcome. Also the scientific level of the 281 free communications and 179 posters was in general good, and many interesting round tables and symposia were arranged. The role of ICOH's Scientific Committees was strengthened, for example, by organizing special sessions around interesting topics. At that time most of them were active, and several new committees had been established.

I had been proposed for the office of president, and as there were no other proposals, I was unanimously elected. Joseph Rutenfranz from Germany was elected Vice President, and Luigi Parmegiani continued as the secretary-treasurer. Nice was elected the venue of the 1993 congress. Its magnificent Acropolis offered a splendid venue for the congress, which will be described in more detail in Jean-François Caillard's article. Up till now the second board meeting at the congress had been an informal chat between new and old members of the board; in Sydney this tradition was abandoned and the second board meeting (that of the newly elected board, without resigned members participating anymore) was held as a formal meeting with a strict agenda. Subcommittees of the board were given special tasks, such as overseeing the rules, membership questions, financial



During nineteen years in the service of ICOH, many presentations were made.

questions, and so forth. Joseph Rutenfranz took over my former task as coordinator of the Scientific Committees, and the intention was also that he should carry the responsibility to liaise with the organizers of the Montréal congress. Already at the board meeting we decided that the Constitution and the Bye-Laws, although rather new, needed a revision and the officers started working at that task together with the appropriate task group of the board.

Our collaboration began in an excellent way, but to everyone's great grief it was suddenly interrupted by two tragic events. First Luigi had to resign office on December 31, 1988 because of a serious illness, and he passed away soon after, on March 7, 1989. Only one week earlier, on February 28, Joseph died suddenly and unexpectedly. It is clear that the loss of two such important office-bearers caused some disarray in ICOH's administration, although Luigi Parmeggiani heroically continued to manage ICOH's office until the end of 1988. His efforts facilitated the smooth transfer of the office to Singapore and helped the passing over of general information, the accounts and other written material to the new secretary-treasurer, Jerry Jeyaratnam, who kindly accepted to manage this task from the beginning of 1989 upon the request of the board. This exceptional procedure of appointment of an officer by the board was necessary to ensure the uninterrupted continuation of ICOH's administration, as an election by ballot would have required a minimum of nine months. However, the office of vice president was left vacant because the board considered that appointing an interim vice president for the rather short time left to the next regular election was not practical. Therefore the board delegated the Vice-President's tasks to me until the next regular election in 1990.

My six years' experience with overseeing the work of the Scientific Committees did a lot to help me, but I had to make two originally unscheduled trips to Montréal to meet with the congress organizers and screen the abstracts, so I got more than my normal share of work tasks. Fortunately they were very experienced and competent people, and also the Scientific Committees had by now good experience of the logistics involved in the screening of the abstracts. Besides, the Sydney organizing committee had initiated a new tradition of writing a 'testament' to the next organizers, so they did



The 1993 Congress was organized in Nice, France

not have to reinvent the powder.

Fortunately the drafting of the amended Constitution and the Bye-Laws were almost ready, and after a board meeting in Helsinki in late 1989, the draft of the new constitution was sent out to all ICOH members in May 1990 with instructions that all possible suggestions for changes should be delivered in writing no later than a month before the congress, and that only such suggestions could be subject to voting at the General Assembly. There were rather few suggestions, and the new constitution was accepted by the General Assembly and the Bye-Laws by the newly elected board. One of the major changes was that there should be two vice presidents, and a semantic change was that the secretary-treasurer became the Secretary General.

During the triennium, ICOH's membership had grown from 1300 at the Sydney congress to 1700. Of great economical impact was the fact that the number of sustaining members had arisen from 10 at the Sydney congress to 29 in Montréal. The Montréal congress was a great success. It was held in the excellent Palais des Congrès and had attracted 2300 participants from 77 countries. The scientific level was high – especially the invited plenary lectures were excellent – and the practical arrangements worked very smoothly. The plenary lectures had interesting themes, such as occupational cancer, risk assessment, the hazards of passive smoking, and accident prevention. There were 300 free communications and 260 posters. Several participants from developing

countries were invited and their costs covered by the congress organizers. The elections of officers had to proceed according to the old constitution, and Jean-François Caillard became elected the only Vice President. I was uncontested, and thus automatically re-elected. Jerry became now formally elected Secretary General. At the voting at the General Assembly in Montréal Stockholm got most votes for the 1996 congress.

Jean-François now took over the Scientific Committees, which lessened my work burden considerably. He managed the job in an excellent way and during his period as Vice President several important new committees were established. Already several years earlier a special committee chaired by Georges-Henri Coppee had begun drafting an ethical code to be used by occupational health professionals as an ICOH recommendation. This committee had done an extremely valuable work during several years, starting almost from scratch, and discussion and approval of this code was the main topic of the between-congresses board meeting in November 1991 in Singapore. During two days of intensive work the document was finalized and approved by the board. It was first published in English and French, but soon after translated into six other languages.

The triennium 1990–93 coincided with the worldwide deep economic recession, which had a heavy negative impact on occupational health activities and priorities all over the world. However, ICOH's finances remained good thanks

to the extra fees paid by no-members at the Sydney and Montréal congresses – temporary membership fees one could say – and also because of the much increased number of sustaining members. The recession also meant that many industrialized countries drastically cut their foreign aid to developing countries, which also had an impact on the situation in occupational health, especially on training. Another important development – positive this time – was the “bloodless revolution” in Eastern Europe and the full independence of the former satellite countries. When the truth of the very poor working conditions and level of occupational health became evident, something very different from the former propaganda, ICOH started activities to support our colleagues in these countries, but there was not much we could do, because their national economies were too weak to make significant improvements in occupational health matters. Our intention was to at least make it easier for our Eastern European colleagues to attend ICOH activities, but it took several years for these efforts to become fruitful.

Supporting developing countries was also one of ICOH’s priorities during this triennium as it still is, within the limits of ICOH’s relatively restricted economic resources. ICOH gave financial aid to the first Pan-African Congress on Occupational Health in Lusaka, Zambia in

1992. This successful congress, organized by our board member Deogratias Sekimpi, attracted 100 participants from 14 African and 7 non-African countries. Of the officers, Jean-François Caillard was very active in this endeavour. ICOH also organized, together with the National University of Singapore, the first international course for health professionals in developing countries. This course involved several of our board members as lecturers.

In 1990 ICOH’s archives were founded. They are kept in the Clinica del Lavoro in Milan. Unfortunately much early material had disappeared, but some old documents have been recovered. The intention is to continuously refill it with new material, which becomes ‘history’ in due time.

Jean-François had a double role in the preparations of the Nice congress, being ICOH’s Vice-President and belonging to the local organizing committee at the same time. The French organizers understood this and therefore invited me to be present at several of their meetings, without the problems involved in a double role. The preparations went smoothly (except for some internal French political problems with organizing the congress in Nice), and the Scientific Committees again assisted in scrutinizing the abstracts. The conference palace in Nice, the Acropolis, was probably the most splendid venue so far in ICOH’s history. The practical arrangements were excellent and also the scientific level was high. The General Assembly decided to give the 2000 congress to Singapore. A temporary

change of the constitution was necessary for this – otherwise the ‘correct’ year would have been 1999. The change was made in order to be able to combine the commemoration of ICOH’s centennial jubilee in 2006 with a congress.

With the support of two such outstanding coworkers as Jean-François and Jerry, my task as president during my second and last term felt easy. Also the rest of ICOH’s organization was well trimmed, not least the Scientific Committees, and the finances were stable, thanks to several new sustaining members and the new practice of charging a slightly higher congress fee from non-members. The difference went to ICOH and improved our finances substantially. (But, alas, this is a relative statement. With more funding much more could have been achieved!) Hence, when I stepped down from the presidency in Nice, I could ‘deliver’ an organization being in good shape to my successor, Jean-François Caillard. During his seven-year presidency ICOH developed further. This period will be the topic of his essay.