

The Foundation and the Early Years of PAABS (PABMB) #

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In September 1967 I moved from the University of London to take up the Chair of Biochemistry at the University of Miami. I had helped found the Federation of European Biochemical Societies (FEBS) and had been its first Secretary General, and I looked around for similar opportunities in the Americas, specifically to see whether an equivalent of FEBS might be formed.

Happenstance proved most fortunate. A long-time colleague, Bernie Horecker, was about to become the President of the American Society for Biological Chemists (ASBC, now ASBMB). A Canadian colleague, Donald Whittaker, was about to preside over the Canadian Biochemical Society, while I had formed a close acquaintance, because of common research interests, with the most prominent biochemist in South America, Luis F. Leloir, who was to win the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1970. Contacting them, and through them other biochemists around the hemisphere brought to light a wide expression of interest in forming a Pan-American version of FEBS.

By mid-1969, with Karl Gaede of Venezuela as the acting President, we had decided to form the Pan-American Association of Biochemical Societies (PAABS). It came into official existence on January 1, 1970, with Luis F. Leloir as the first official President. I was the Secretary General and another enthusiast, Raul Ondarza, from Mexico City, was the Treasurer.

When we began, going from North to South, we included the Biochemical Societies of Canada, the ASBC and the Division of Biological Chemistry of the American Chemical Society and Societies from Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador,

Brazil, Peru, Chile and Argentina. There was a budding Society in Jamaica which we expected to join. We were enthusiastic to mimic FEBS by sponsoring an annual meeting, symposia, issuing a News Bulletin, all of which we did, and creating a publication both to raise our profile and as a source of income. For FEBS, the European Journal of Biochemistry and FEBS Letters were proving to be the sources of very substantial earnings, especially FEBS Letters. In 1971 PAABS held its first Meeting in Caracas, splendidly organized by Gaede. Around 1972 PAABS began the publication of a new-style journal, PAABS Revista, with Cyril Kay, from Canada, as the Editor-in-Chief. This was aimed at graduate students and postdoctorals still on the learning curve in biochemistry. It reprinted classical papers together with a commentary by an expert observer. It was published by Academic Press.

The idea was an excellent one, strongly supported by Horecker, but Revista never took a firm foothold and went out of existence after a few years, never to be replaced by any other PAABS publication.

In 1972 I resigned as Secretary General of PAABS, and was succeeded by Ronald Estabrook of Dallas, with continuing high hopes.

When in 1973 I became the General Secretary of the International Union of Biochemistry (IUB, now IUBMB), I worked to have the Union provide funds to PAABS and to the new Asian-Oceanian Federation (FAOB). Funding began in 1979 and in 1982 an official membership category of Associated Organization was created in the IUB so that PAABS and FAOB gained recognition under the IUB umbrella. Since 1999, all four Regional Organizations, the others being FEBS and the African Federation are Associated Organizations of the IUBMB.

From my vantage in Miami, it has been a disappointment over the years that PAABS (now PABMB) has never flourished as one had hoped. Central America and the Caribbean, with the only recent exceptions of Panama and Cuba, have never been in membership, while the Societies from Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador seem to have gone out of existence.

Helping to revive PABMB is a worthy goal that I urge on the ASBMB and which I hope will be taken up, working with the strong ABC Societies of Latin America, Argentina, Brazil and Chile.

#This article is adapted from one written by Professor Whelan for the JBC Centennial.

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