

## THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL ANESTHESIOLOGY CONFERENCE: BEIRUT 1965

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After many years there are still among us a few senior colleagues who have recollections of the First International Anaesthesiology Conference held in Beirut October 30 to November 2, 1965. This assembly of physicians was a turning point for our specialty in the Middle East region, a foundational event that we should know about and remember. For the sake of nostalgia, and for the many new recruits who have joined our ranks since then, I want to place on record the story of that conference and the personalities who made it happen.

In 1964 I was a young department chairman at the American University of Beirut. I had recently returned from spending an exhilarating year as research fellow at the University of California, San Francisco. Under the watchful eye of Dr. Stuart Cullen who had earlier enjoyed a week-long visit to Beirut, I had immersed myself in the tedious experiments of the original MAC studies with Doctor Ted Eger, and also in studies of adaptation to high altitude with Doctor John Severinghaus. Both of these men were congenial but demanding teachers. In neighboring labs Dr. John Clements and his associates were making the first exciting discoveries of lung surfactant, and always in the background, encouraging and provoking us, was our famous Institute Director Dr. Julius Comroe. Here was a bracing intellectual climate that confronted me with the inevitable question: How could I convey even a small fraction of this energy and excitement back to Beirut, and also to other anesthesiology leaders in nearby countries ?

This question still burned in my mind unanswered as I resumed my work at A.U.B. in 1964. And a partial answer came from an unexpected source: a visit by two representatives from ASTRA, the widely respected pharmaceutical company based in Sweden. These two persons were not your usual sales people. They were senior professionals in the company who had a more expansive vision than the immediate sales of their products. Looking at the big picture, they were devising strategies for long-term company growth; and for this to happen, they saw that a strong and flourishing anesthesiology specialty was needed. Perhaps their company could help. One of these visitors was Mr. Mogens Green-Petersen, a business executive from Sweden. The other was a surgeon, Doctor Halina Proscher. Her practice in cosmetic surgery was in Hamburg, but she also worked as a consultant to ASTRA. Her role was to speak as an equal medical colleague to doctors and professors.

Our first meeting was formal and routine, discussing the A.U.B. department, our teaching program, and what I could tell of the professors and teachers in other medical schools in the region. I had to admit I had almost no knowledge of colleagues in other universities, even close to Beirut. We were working separately, in isolation. But I did have some clinical interests which caught their attention. I seized the opportunity to describe my enthusiasm for continuous epidural analgesia in childbirth, and my own design and fabrication of a new disposable nylon catheter. I described my personal experience with the first one thousand epidurals in our hospital. Over several months, I had given all of them myself, remaining on-call 24 hours a day, so I could make mistakes and learn how to avoid them, and teach technique to others. Even before obstetric epidurals were introduced into Europe, these early trial cases were the first in our hospital and doubtless the first in the whole Middle East.

That conversation apparently stimulated some ideas in my visitors. ASTRA was a world leader in producing local anesthetic drugs, lidocaine and others; and epidural anesthesia was a prime use for them. They phoned me later and requested another meeting, this time over dinner. And it was at this second encounter that they unveiled a proposal in which they sought my help. They wanted to give anesthesiology a boost throughout the whole region. They described their impressions after visiting anesthesiology leaders in several countries. These included Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Iran. In these countries they had observed that anesthesiology was experiencing a painfully slow maturing as a proud and respected specialty. It was financially disadvantaged compared with some other specialties, and did not enjoy high public recognition and respect. The leaders in these countries, beyond expressing a vague paranoia, revealed a key handicap: they worked in isolation and were not acquainted with even their close neighbors. There was no feeling of a professional community that crossed national boundaries, no collaboration, no friendship and mutual stimulation, and little support.

The ASTRA duo informed me they were authorized to offer financial help towards developing a trans-national anesthesiology organization in which

goodwill and collaboration could flourish. In an improved climate, proud professional excellence and high specialty standards could be more effectively promoted. They had in mind an initial conference to which would be invited the anesthesiology leaders from a long list of countries. They felt that Beirut, which in those days was a lively and popular tourist destination, would be a suitable place to hold the first conference. Did I see wisdom in such a plan, and would I be willing to help host such a conference, perhaps at the American University campus?

Guardedly I agreed that the proposal had merit; it seemed to be headed in the direction I had hoped for, following my invigorating year in San Francisco. By all means let us aim for professional excitement, collegiality, sharing of ideas and problems, even some rivalry, and work to build a regional community of academic friends. Perhaps here was a means for breaking out of the isolation that had restricted our growth for so long.

We took time out for thinking through the issues. Then we met again to develop a plan of action. An early result was to be a series of visits by myself, with the two ASTRA friends, to other centers, including Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad and Teheran. In due course, this tour did take place. At each center we made new friends and spoke hopefully of starting a new organization for anesthesiologists in the Middle East.

Because no one except the ASTRA representatives accompanied me on these visits, it seems worthwhile to mention some of the names of men, leaders in their time, who appear prominently in my memories of those early ice-breaking visits. In Cairo I was welcomed by Professor Mahmoud El Hakem, and toured Kasr El Aini Hospital. At Ain Shams University I was welcomed by Professor Wadid Bakhoum and by Doctor Shaker, who superintended a junior giving a spinal, using a needle of truly impressive size. At an evening meeting I met the energetic Dr. Adly Shirbini, and listened to an energetic lecture from a bright new faculty member recently returned from Liverpool, Dr. Anis Baraka. Also at that time I befriended the engaging Dr. Ezzat Abouleish. And at a later time I was impressed to see the accomplishments and professional standing achieved by the professor in Alexandria, Dr. Hashem Nassar.

This list of significant names is lengthened when we move to other major cities. Accompanied by Mr. Green-Petersen and Dr. Proschler, we three were received graciously everywhere, and my horizons were being constantly expanded. Barriers between neighbors were breaking down; our plan was working! Dr. Bourhan Abed in Damascus organized a meeting, and toured us through his department at the Mouasat Hospital. In Aleppo we met Doctor Kayyali, and I began a friendship with Professor M. Taha Jasser that has continued for many years since then. In Baghdad we had an evening reception where I made the acquaintance of Dr. Enaizi and Dr. Abdul Amir Al-Uzri. Further afield, in Teheran, I met Dr. Ali Farr, Dr. Fotoohi and Dr. Mohamed Tashayod. From Shiraz came Dr. Morteza Badii. On a separate trip I spent time in Istanbul, and established a personal relationship with Professor Sadi Sun and with Dr. Oner. Later in Beirut I met Dr. Ozdemir Demir from Ankara.

These men listed here greeted us in their home cities during those early first visits. They deserve to be placed on record here because they were true foundation-builders. In those years they were known and respected leaders in their own countries. But in the larger international world of anesthesiology most of them were not widely known. Today a new generation of able followers have taken their place. Yet we who are devoted Middle-Easterners must remember and honor them gratefully. They remained my good friends and supporters throughout my remaining years in Beirut.

Recognition must also be given here to my Lebanese associates and colleagues. Prominent among them were Dr. Adib Abu Haidar, Dr. Raymond Asmar, Dr. Robert Haddad, Dr. Wajih Sabbagh, Dr. Khattar Kanaan, Dr. Musa Muallem and Dr. Fouad Haddad. They were stout-hearted friends and supporters. Of course they had no understanding of the plans I was making, helped by ASTRA. And I suspect they were sometimes puzzled by my talk of bringing into existence a new organization that could win the enthusiastic support of diverse anesthesiologists from different lands and cultures.

I must confess that all of the persons named here are drawn wholly from my memory today, after the passing of nearly fifty years. Of course there were others, equally worthy of mention, whose names I

do not recall at the time of this writing. I regret any such omissions. My contemporaries from that era may remind me of others who helped fight those early battles. I now gladly acknowledge the contributions of all who, named or not, helped during those early times of dreaming and hopeful planning. Here I am simply relating my main theme: How, with the help of my new ASTRA friends, I was able to quickly enlarge my circle of professional acquaintances in the Middle East. These personal connections were the foundation on which we hoped to build an effective community of colleagues. We were on our way.

I have tried to describe the state of anesthesiology in 1964, and my hope that we might make a bold new beginning. Those early visits to major cities were a necessary introduction. But much remained to be decided. My fellow-conspirators and I agreed that a regional society was the desired end-result, and we confidently expected this goal could be accomplished, given the goodwill we were experiencing on every side. We would call it "The Middle East Society of Anaesthesiologists".

To get the ball rolling, we hoped to hold an international conference in Beirut in October-November 1965, the first ever held in the Middle East. ASTRA would provide funding, including travel and hotel costs, to bring together all the significant thought leaders from the whole region. In preparation beforehand, we would draft a proposed constitution for the Society, and get advance support for this by calling together a Constitution Planning Committee that would convene prior to the main Conference program in October. Later we decided we should start publishing a journal to serve as a communications link between our newly discovered friends and neighbors.

As these ideas took firm shape we became more excited. It seemed we were indeed giving birth to a new era for anesthesiology in our region. The organizing details were a huge task, almost entirely in the hands of our staff in the University department in Beirut. The program had to be put together, and it must include prominent leaders in our own countries, but also some distinguished leaders from Europe and North America. We needed some big names, to give the event some serious weight in the view of the wider observing community. We selected carefully some of the most

respected leaders in anesthesiology, and to the best of my recollection, every single one of them accepted warmly our invitation to share in a ground-breaking event. My office at A.U.B. was often swamped with mail, in the days before word processors and the internet.

It fell to my task to put together a conference program that gave prominence to our international guests. We had to design an attractive program book, and for this we needed a logo that might become, in time, a symbol of our new professional society. For this I sought help from the graphic artists connected with l'Imprimerie Catholique in Beirut. I told them (using my halting French) that historically the opium poppy had long been honored as the most effective source of pain relief. Could they please propose an image of a poppy, stylized in a way that was suitable for a logo. They came up with a poppy design that I liked. It made its first appearance on the cover of our program book, and ever since then it has been prominently displayed on the cover of the Middle East Journal of Anesthesiology. Inside our program book I boldly entered this dedication of the new logo:

Long before there was an anaesthesiologist, long before medicine became a science, when healing the sick called for both art and magic, the opium poppy was working its magic in the Ancient East, bringing comfort to the bodies of men, and to their minds peace. It was in our own countries that the poppy was first cultivated....in Persia, in Syria, in Asia Minor. This same flower, after thousands of years, still gives us our best analgesic drugs. We hail it as the symbol of the Middle East Society of Anaesthesiologists.

But this bold dedication to the proposed new Society turned out to be only a hopeful dream. When October 1965 came at last, our honored guests from other lands arrived, and our Constitution Planning Committee set to work. I thought we had drafted a fine constitution, and to win support for it we invited from London none other than Geoffrey Organe, the urbane, dignified President of the World Federation of Societies of Anaesthesiologists. He was the consummate diplomat, appointed to serve as the Committee chairman who could add his authority to the proceedings, and bring our new Society's constitution to the assembled delegates for their approval.

But it did not happen this way. With all his august dignity and aplomb, Dr. Organe was no match in Committee for the complexities of the political sensitivities in our region. In our consideration of the constitution, any issue that involved national pride could not be compromised by a national spokesman. At a personal level our Committee members were gentle and good-humored colleagues. But back home they would be accountable to political authorities, and they could not publicly sign off on the draft constitution we had set before them. Unresolvable differences arose over such issues as naming the famous Gulf either the Persian Gulf or the Arabian Gulf. To some it may seem a trivial detail, but not to them. When national pride and sensitivity were at stake, no one could yield. In short order Doctor Organe was out of his depth, unable to steer the discussion towards a workable conclusion. The prickly politics were too much for him.

Throughout these lively discussions my heart sank. I was present and witnessed it all. Desperately I sought for a compromise, a way to emerge with the functions and benefits of a society, even if there was no agreed constitution. And that was my final plea. The anatomy of a society was not as important as its physiology, what it actually accomplished. Let us move forward and organize international congresses. Let us visit one another's departments, and invite neighbors to come as visiting lecturers. And by all means let us take steps to publish a journal that could be an effective voice, a link to join us together in a common bond of friendship and collegiality, neighbors with shared interests and similar goals. This was the decision that finally came out of the Planning Committee's deliberations.

Meanwhile the First International Conference, the main public event, moved forward, convening immediately on the heels of our frustrating impasse in the Constitution Planning Committee. Simply stated, it was a great success, richly enjoyed by all who were lucky to be there. By my count the registrants numbered 127, and came from 21 different countries. Lectures were given in Dodge Hall on the campus of the American University of Beirut. We were welcomed by the Lebanese Minister of Health Dr. Knio, and music was provided by the Lebanese Military Brass Band. Dignitaries from the Government and the University

graciously appeared at our opening ceremony.

In my judgment the lectures were excellent, the subjects treated being appropriate for that era, a time of simpler technology. In addition to delegates from Middle East countries, we welcomed a galaxy of outstanding speakers from far afield, men whose names were household words amongst anesthesiologists everywhere. Sir Robert Macintosh came from Oxford, in addition to his fellow-Brits Geoffrey Organe from London and Bruce Scott from Edinburgh. The great Martin son-Holmdahl was there from Uppsala. Bill Hamilton came from Iowa, and Guy Vourc'h from Paris. From Copenhagen came J. Kirchhoff and H. Engell., both of them connected with the notorious W.H.O. anesthesiology course in their city. By any standards, this was a distinguished assembly.

Naturally at this event the traditional Lebanese hospitality was on prominent display. The social program was a delight. Participants took tours to Beiteddine and to Baalbek, and there was a reception at the Phoenicia Hotel. As a final celebration there was a dazzling banquet and floor show at the famed Casino du Liban. In all my many years of attending conferences, I cannot remember another medical meeting that matched this one. It was big enough to be serious, yet small enough to get to know everyone. There was great congeniality and a sheer pleasure at being together, of making new friends after many years working in isolation. I have a treasured photograph of Sir Robert standing amongst the gigantic stones of Baalbek. After many years I visited him in his Oxford home. Though he was then in his nineties, his mind was clear, and he reminisced warmly about his memorable time with us in Beirut.

So were our hopes and our goals achieved? Some of them undoubtedly were. Friendships and next-door collegiality sprang into existence where it had not existed before. We showed that international conferences could accomplish many good things for our profession; they should become a planned part of our scholarly agenda. Our ASTRA friends were at first perplexed that the Planning Committee had not completed all of its task. But in time they came to agree that we could proceed to live and plan as if a Middle East Society did exist, but without formal membership and subscriptions. We could carry out its

functions, plan conferences, and eventually publish a journal, the Middle East Journal of Anaesthesiology. We could do all this with or without a constitution, and cultivate simple good-neighborliness. They gave strong encouragement to me, since the Committee had entrusted to me the task of designing and publishing a journal. During the three years I served as the Journal's Founding Editor, ASTRA continued their generous support, through paid advertisements and other means.

I still have in my possession a copy of the program book prepared for that First International Conference. It is a monument to much hard work, and to the vision and dreams of many good friends who helped make the event the delightful success that it became. But for me, the book is also a monument to a remarkably rich teamwork that developed between myself and the representatives of ASTRA. I could not have asked for more helpful and understanding collaborators. For me they represented an admirable relationship of mutual respect, the kind that is possible and should be expected between physicians and the companies that supply their drugs.

In recent years there has developed a climate of suspicion in which profit motives of industry are viewed as sinister, possibly hostile to the noble ideals of medical science.

These suspicions, so prevalent in Euro-American culture, lack balance. Economic interests are legitimate and should be respected, transparent and not resented. When openly recognized they need not threaten our professional autonomy or judgment. My experience working closely with a major drug company in 1964-65 was one of mutual respect and pleasurable teamwork. It was clear to all that ASTRA would win new friends and achieve greater visibility by helping anesthesiology to flourish in the burgeoning Middle East. The Company's goals overlapped with those of our young specialty. To launch new initiatives, and to break out of our old constrictedness....these were equally our goals in universities, in operating theaters and also in Company boardrooms. We were moving in the same direction, and we needed each other.

After these many years I salute those friends in industry who perceived our needs in 1964 and were willing to contribute financial resources and also add their unique suggestions on how best to promote

forward progress in anesthesiology. They made possible some memorable firsts for anesthesiology in the Middle East. Their vision and our dreams coincided ideally, in the quest for excellence that we shared. The spirit of hope and expectation and trust that we shared then, allied with focused hard work, remains for me as a splendid example of altruism at its finest.

Time has marched on. Political and cultural strife has sadly clouded the atmosphere in some of the lands that were represented so happily at the 1965 conference. There is still no Middle East Society of Anesthesiologists, but we press forward without it. There are some national societies, and there have been energetic Pan-Arab congresses. Our early isolation is a thing of the past. One noteworthy success has been the continuing vigor of *The Middle East Journal of Anesthesiology*. Published first in 1966 following that first International Conference, I was pleased in 1969 to entrust its editing and management to Dr. Anis Baraka and his associate Dr. Fouad Haddad. After many years of superb work they in turn have passed the torch to Dr. Ghassan Kanazi and his team at the American University of Beirut. It serves a diverse community of clinicians and thought-leaders in many countries. May it long continue and flourish.

The science and technical sophistication of anesthesiology have come a long way since 1965. My hope and my prayer is that those advances on the technical side will be matched by a parallel and equal devotion to the ethics of medicine, to the dignity and value of human life, and to the ideals of selfless service to those who need our help. At our conference in 1965 we heard references to our ancient forefather, Hippocrates. In his clinic and school for physicians on the Greek island of Kos, he was located close to us in Beirut. Now, decades after our conference, let us resolve to preserve the spirit and ideals of that ancient master in our hospitals, and especially in our hearts. We must insist, as did the ancient Greek, on the high value of all human life. Compassion and devoted service should be our constant guiding torch, especially when the political climate seems to be threatening. Before God and before all mankind, the relieving of pain and the safeguarding of life are goals that belong to no single race or color, language or culture. They belong to all of our human family.

**Bernard Brandstater**

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