

## A Short (Personal) History of the Australasian Virology Society

Paul R Young

It was a warm and pleasant afternoon outside a beer house in Berlin at the International Congress of Virology in 1990. A few Australian delegates had escaped the confines of the conference venue to sample the local brew and, of course, discuss virology. It was a throw-away comment from Gerry Both that captured my attention – “You know, we only ever get together at these international meetings”. It was so true, and that line played over in my head for some time.

I had been a member of the Australian Society of Microbiology since 1976, when most microbiologists in the country (and we virologists considered ourselves very much a part of that family at the time) would come together at the annual meetings. I moved to the UK in 1978 and found that to also be the case for their national group, the Society for General Microbiology. The virology community was very strong there, still is, and you felt that you really had missed something if, for some reason you couldn't make it one year. But when I returned to Australia in 1989, I found that the virology community had, to some degree, splintered. There was a core of ASM devotees, mostly with a clinical/diagnostic focus but many, particularly those working in molecular virology did not frequent the ASM meetings.

A few years after my return to Australia, I became involved in the organisation of the virology arm of ASM, and was Chair of the Virology Special Interest Group, the Virology SIG, for about 6 years in the 1990s. During that time, a few ASM colleagues and I put a lot of effort into generating meeting programs each year that we hoped would attract a broad sector of the virology community. But I have to say, it was an uphill battle – a feeling that the annual ASM meetings weren't for the hard-core virologist was firmly entrenched, despite the quality of the programs on offer.

Reflecting on the comments of Gerry Both all those years previously, at the ASM Virology SIG meeting in Adelaide, 1997 I raised the notion of a virology meeting for the first time, recalled in the minutes of that meeting:

*Based on the wide-spread disinterest of many virologists with the current ASM Meetings, the convenor raised the issue of a possible change in structure - a separate meeting under the auspices of ASM. There was a mixed reaction to this proposal and much discussion. Overall, it was felt that the withdrawal of virology from ASM was not in the interest of either. Because of the limits on time, the meeting did not reach any satisfactory conclusions. The convenor is to continue to canvass opinion and the issue will be discussed again at the next SIG meeting in Hobart.*

We did indeed continue the discussions over that following year, and in addition to those ongoing discussions and debates I carried out a survey of the virology community in Australia, concluding that ~5% of that community were ASM members. My report to the ASM in 1998 directly addressed these discussions:

*Discussions were held at the SIG meeting in Adelaide '97 on Virology's place in the annual ASM meetings. Both separate and satellite meetings were suggested as was maintenance of the status quo. Debate has continued throughout the year with both ASM and non-ASM members and this issue will again be discussed at the Hobart Meeting.*

This report did not go down well with the ASM Executive during their meeting in Hobart that year. I distinctly recall some frank side bar discussions! While my proposal was for a dedicated virology meeting under the umbrella of the ASM, it was viewed as a break-away and

that was unacceptable. The mood at that ASM meeting, including our own SIG AGM was that we weren't ready for change.

Nevertheless, on returning to Brisbane I prepared a short discussion paper entitled "Virology and ASM" in which I summarised the current situation and the possible options our community had. I set out three options as I saw them: stay as we are, organise a satellite meeting or a separate "National Virology Meeting". In reading that paper now, I can recall the frustration many of us felt at the time. I shared it amongst the virology network in September of that year and the casual discussions continued.

#### VIROLOGY AND ASM

##### **Current situation:**

- **Falling membership.** We are currently compiling a comprehensive list of virology groups and individuals from around Australia (both ASM and non-ASM members). We can only guesstimate at this stage but approximately 5-10% of virologists would belong to ASM. Plant virology, as a discipline was lost to ASM some years ago.
- **Narrowing of focus.** Over the last 5-10 years the focus of ASM meetings has moved more to clinical (particularly diagnostic) aspects of virology. The consequence has been the diminishing attendance of many members involved in molecular virology, immunology etc who felt that the conference now offered little for them.
- **Virology SIG.** The gradual positioning of virology within the ASM framework as "just another SIG". This was an inevitable Catch 22 situation brought about primarily because of the falling membership of virologists. Merely looking at numbers would justify nothing more. But with this status came the flavour of a small group, e.g. little access to funding for support of international speakers (one per meeting does not really reflect the impact of virology in the discipline of Microbiology). In both the UK and US societies (SGM and ASM respectively), Virology is considered an equal partner with Bacteriology. Indeed the US virology community has split from ASM (at least in terms of meetings), setting up their own ASV agenda.
- **Cost.** This is probably the single biggest factor that is most concerning to members of our SIG. The holding of the annual meeting in large venues in capital cities has resulted in an unacceptable increase in registration and associated fees. ASM membership registration has been over the last few years greater than most international meetings. Registration for non-members is simply prohibitive, adding to the spiraling decline in attendance. Simply put, virologists would prefer to spend their hard-earned travel money on an international meeting. As for students, they stopped coming some years ago! ASM used to be the venue for students to cut their teeth on presentation style etc. They can no longer afford to attend.
- **Symposium nature of the conference.** The upshot of all of this is that the meetings tend now to be a collection of Symposia with invited speakers. Very few abstracts are received to allow us to set up Proffered Paper sessions of recent work. This is really where the action should be.

##### **Possibilities:**

- **Stay as we are.** The inevitable result of this will be a falling membership with the likely maintenance of a *de facto* clinical virology group comprising a minor part of future meetings.
- **Satellite meetings.** It may be possible to set up satellite meetings at the ASM annual meeting (probably over 4 days, Friday to Monday?) that are independently organized by the Virology SIG in consultation with the local organizing committee. The issue of cost is still to be addressed however. Without a SUBSTANTIAL reduction in both registration and accommodation costs this scenario will still be prohibitive to students.
- **A separate "National Virology Meeting".** This would hopefully be held under the ASM banner. A great deal of support for this approach has been voiced. This might entail either a yearly or biennial meeting at a single venue which provides inexpensive accommodation on site. The focus would be on current research, including diagnostic and clinical virology, but also bringing back the plant virologists, veterinary virologists etc. A number of invited overseas speakers would set the tone for the meeting. Essentially along similar lines to the current hepatitis meetings held in Sydney each year. This strategy should include the retention of selected Symposium topics in virology and a diagnostic and clinical virology program in the yearly ASM meeting. The latter will cater for those who use the ASM meeting to brush up on the latest in virology and for those who have a wider brief than virology alone.

I have to stress that these are my personal views on the current debate. Many of those I have canvassed support these ideas however there are those who do not. This was evident at our SIG meeting in Adelaide. Clearly, any format change will only be made following full consultation with SIG members and virologists within the wider community.

Paul Young  
Virology SIG Convenor  
September, 1998

#### *"Virology and ASM" discussion paper – September, 1998*

I should point out that there have been considerable changes in the ASM meetings since those days, with these yearly events returning to a more student friendly, immersive meeting environment.

But the nadir for me came at the ASM annual conference held in Cairns in 2000. I was still Virology SIG convenor and we had put together what I thought was one of our best programs. We had invited some top overseas speakers to add to a great local line-up. However, virtually all of the Australian speakers flew in for the day of their talk and then left, negating any semblance of a community coming together. In one memorable session, one of the world's leading HIV experts had an audience of 8 people, three of whom were his fellow session speakers.

I didn't give up on ASM, as my later appointment as ASM President from 2012-2014 will attest, but the Cairns experience did provide the impetus to simply do it, to organise a separate virology meeting regardless....and wear the flak later!

So, towards the end of 2000 and beginning of 2001, I reached out to colleagues via email exploring whether there was interest in such a meeting. I was overwhelmed by the largely positive response. We therefore set about organizing our first scientific meeting to be held in December of that year. A special mention here to Nigel McMillan who provided considerable

support as a member of a fledgling organising committee – other members of that first committee were Peter Young, Robert Harding, Damian Purcell and Nitin Saxena. I began the process of searching for a venue and sent out a series of emails, trying to get a feel for whether the virology community would buy in to the concept. It wasn't a given that just because you build it, they would come - nevertheless, the Australian Virology Group was born.

The search for the venue led me to Kingfisher Bay Resort on K'gari (Fraser Island). I knew Fraser well as a bushwalking uni student and the resort offered the perfect combination of relaxed, but "captured" environment – what better place to head to than a tropical island during an Australian summer. The journey to get there by some of our more distant colleagues (plane, bus and boat trip away) was somewhat challenging, but worth the effort (that's what I kept telling them!). As a way of keeping the costs down, we didn't enlist the services of a PCO (definitely NOT recommended) so the workload was intense that year. In addition to dealing with the venue, I designed, drafted and put together the abstract book and my and Nigel's students and staff provided the person power to run the event. My ignorance of the details of meeting organisation saw me personally underwriting the financial commitment to the resort....oh, so that's what I just signed? Below is the first email I sent to colleagues around Australia in the first half of 2001.

#### FIRST NOTICE

Dear Colleagues

Well, we are finally under way! The 1st meeting of the Australian Virology Group will be held from the 6th to 9th December, 2001 at Kingfisher Bay, Fraser Island.

As you will recall from previous emails, over the last few years I have been proposing a national virology meeting as a venue to build up the collaborative network within Australia. We all collaborate with our international colleagues but rarely have the opportunity of sharing our work on the national scene. In addition, there is a woeful lack of opportunities for post-graduate students to participate in this style of exchange with the yearly ASM meetings becoming progressively more expensive and less relevant to molecular virologists. So, with your support we can give virology the national perspective it has needed for a long time. The plan is to commence the meeting on the afternoon of the 6th and finish at lunch on Sunday the 9th December. For Friday and Saturday, the afternoons will be free for you to explore the island and we will get back into sessions in the late afternoon and evenings. We are in the process of setting up a web page for the meeting and will advise as soon as it is up and running.

All very good but you may be wondering - why Fraser Island! When we investigated the possible locations, The Kingfisher Bay Resort on Fraser Island turned out to be ideal with regards the two main criteria we had set down as being essential.

1. Captive participants. I'm sure that is the experience of most of us that those meetings where all participants work, eat and sleep in the same location are the most productive. It's usually the discussions late at night over a cold beer that are the most rewarding! The Resort is fully self-contained and surrounded by native Fraser Island bushland and Hervey Bay - so there's no escape!
2. Low cost. Surprisingly, Kingfisher Bay Resort meets this criteria as well. As well as the usual hotel style rooms and shared villas (some taking 6-8 people so you will have the opportunity of sharing with your fellow lab members) there are also "Wilderness Lodges" with rates as low as \$25 per night. So, depending on your budget you can choose the style of accommodation you want.

With the airlines fighting for customers (thanks to Virgin and Impulse), most will be able to fly into Brisbane at reasonable cost. We will be putting on various forms of transport from the Brisbane airport to Kingfisher, from buses (a three hour coach trip) to flights - again, depending on your budget. The catamaran trip over to the Island is relatively short and inexpensive for group bookings.

The Kingfisher Bay Resort website is given below for your interest.  
<http://www.kingfisherbay.com/indexthree.html>

With sponsorship and ASM support we also plan to keep the registration cost as low as possible.

The facilities will cater for roughly 300 conference participants. It would be excellent to see all those Australian virologists in one place!!!

This time I would like to request feedback. We need to get a rough idea of numbers so I would appreciate it if you could email me by return with a simple message outlining whether you are interested in attending this meeting. I would also appreciate it if you could please pass this email onto colleagues who haven't received a copy. We will also be sending out a flyer and notices in due course.

I look forward to seeing as many of you as possible on Fraser Island in December!

Regards  
Paul Young  
National Convener, Virology SIG, ASM

*Email to virology colleagues – early 2001*

The Organizing Committee had two primary objectives which we hoped this meeting would meet and reflected the views I had put forward in my proposal to the virology community back in 1998. The first was that the meeting would provide an enjoyable and productive forum for discussions not only between groups who are familiar with each other's work but

also between those who would not normally have the opportunity to interact. Such a forum hadn't really existed within the Australian context for quite a few decades, indeed since the earlier days of the ASM. The second, and no less important goal, was to provide a venue for the greater involvement of our students. Very few opportunities existed for our students to experience this sort of conference environment and one of the underlying principles of the meeting was an emphasis on keeping the costs within the reach of a student budget. To this end, we set out to keep the registration costs to a minimum and sought sponsorships in order to offer Travelling Scholarships to our students.

With some trepidation we awaited the first registrations to roll in and were thrilled with the overall response. The meeting was held over 5 days, from the 5<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> December with 230 delegates and covering areas incorporating plant, bacterial, animal and human virology. As originally intended, the focus was heavily oriented to student involvement – about 1/3 of delegates were Honours and PhD students. To further emphasize the important role we hoped the students would take in the meeting we made a concerted effort, with the help of the Session Chairs, to feature as many students as possible in the oral presentations. Their contributions to the meeting, both oral and poster presentations were a highlight and set the stage and expectation for later meetings. We were very pleased to be able to offer a total of 21 awards to worthy recipients, funded by organizations and Societies who took the risk and generously supported an untested entity (CSL Ltd, The Australian Society for Microbiology, CRC for Vaccine Technology, Biota Holdings Ltd and The University of Queensland).



*Moments from AVG1 - 2001*

The meeting was roundly celebrated as a success and heralded as beginning a new era in Australian Virology. I sent out a questionnaire early the following year, seeking feedback on a number of issues with the major outcome being a commitment to hold these national meetings every 2 years.

Except for this COVID-19 impacted 2021 iteration of the meeting, we have kept to that promise with 10 meetings held over the intervening 20 years. The Abstract books below will bring back memories for many in our broader virology community.





*AVG/AVS abstract book covers – 2001-2019*

The Australian Virology Group was a relatively informal grouping, with no official structure and governance. It was established with the sole purpose of bringing the virology community together by running a national meeting every two years. However, after nearly 10 years of these meetings, we began discussing the option of formalising the group as a Society so that we could fulfill a wider objective as an advocacy and lobby group for our discipline. We incorporated as the Australasian Virology Society in 2011, and I was elected the Society's first President. Professors Damian Purcell, Nigel McMillan and Gilda Tachedjian have carried the banner as subsequent Presidents and have framed the Society as a peak body whose opinion is sought on a range of discipline related issues – no more so than during a viral pandemic!

I am enormously proud to be part of the wider Australian virology community. I have known virology before and after AVG/AVS and I believe we are a more connected and collaborative community as a result of this Society. Long may it flourish!

Professor Paul Young  
Brisbane  
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