20th Anniversary Congress of the World Muscle Society, Brighton 2015

Brighton Belle with Biceps Brachii

All aboard the Brighton Belle to join the muscle merry-go-round as another year flies by and we find ourselves celebrating in style at this 20th anniversary “Triple-E” congress. Myologists from around the world descended on the sun-kissed pebbled shores of Britain’s bohemian south coast resort on a gloriously sunny, warm day in late September, to participate in the scientific and social activities on offer at this year’s WMS congress. Alluring though the hot sun, bobbing cool waters and chic cafés may have been, they could not tempt our people away from the intellectually sizzling attraction of this year’s special topics of muscle metabolism and exercise, immune mediated peripheral nerve, neuromuscular junction and muscle disorders, and advances in the treatment of neuromuscular disorders.

Some 70 delegates, medical professionals worldwide eager to broaden their knowledge to pass on to their institutes back home, had already warmed up their myo-neurons at the pre-congress teaching course at the Institute of Neurology in Central London. Introduced in 2002 under the guidance of Marianne de Visser preceding the WMS congress in Rotterdam, this now well-established course offered a mix of lectures, instruction, and hands-on experience with live patients. Thanks to the tireless endeavours of the muscle faculty experts, this year’s course led by Caroline Sewry and Matt Parton had once again been a great success and received very positive feedback.

For the main Congress, events commenced at the Brighton Dome Concert Hall on Wednesday with a big welcome and introductory comments from organisers Francesco Muntoni and Ros Quinlivan. They were delighted to introduce Lynda Hyde, Mayor of Brighton & Hove City Council, who in turn welcomed the great muscle cohort to Brighton and expressed her pleasure that this historic seaside town had been chosen as the venue for the congress, and wished every success in the coming days.

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To entertain and educate delegates as they relaxed after their journey, Neal Maskrey, Visiting Professor at Keele University, presented the opening lecture entitled ‘Dolphins and Cows’ and engaged the audience with an enlightening talk – including audience participation lest anyone might doze off following their long journey – on evidence-informed decision making. He demonstrated how one’s mind remembers and recalls events drawing on past experiences and hearsay. You may think you know how many animals were led into Noah’s Ark – but check the relevant section of the Bible’s Old Testament and you may have a surprise!

As the lecture concluded, delegates filed out of the hall and into Brighton Museum where they were greeted with a bright red cocktail. Amid the eclectic mix of extraordinary exhibits in the museum of furniture old and new, classic and whacky, myologists reunited enjoyed one another’s company, exchanging news and talking muscle, glass of sauvignon blanc in one hand and salmon cream crouton canapé in the other. Meanwhile from the gallery above, string band The Mountain Firework Quartet provided musical entertainment with their unique strumming and plucking that swirled amid museum exhibits as diverse as an art nouveau dresser and a surrealist kissy-lip red sofa.

On Thursday morning ahead of the scientific proceedings, events began with the opening speech of our WMS President, Victor Dubowitz, addressing delegates who had risen bright and early and made their way to the Dome. This was a special landmark occasion as the Brighton congress marked the 20th birthday of the World Muscle Society, conceived on 6 March 1995 and born three months later, on 5 June. The very first WMS congress had been in London in 1996, and here we were again for the 20th Congress back in London – or at least nearby in Brighton, “London’s beach resort”, the congress size and format having changed somewhat since the early days. However, the principle of including social events in the price of the registration cost remained central to the WMS philosophy to encourage cohesion and communication. Victor Dubowitz gave a fleeting tour of the first twenty years, including the dramatic events that had impacted on the congresses around the turn of the Millennium, but the Society had weathered the storms and was in great shape.

This Brighton congress was the largest yet, the initial ceiling of 500 having already been reached by the end of May, and further ceilings passed in the ensuing weeks, until an ultimate limit of 750 was agreed by the local organisers. In keeping with the Society’s desire to encourage new young and active members to the congresses, the WMS executive board, through its Education Fund, had been able to award over 70 Fellowship prizes of 500 euros to younger delegates still in training who had submitted exceptionally high quality posters.

Speeches over, enthusiastic delegates fired up with full English breakfasts of eggs, bacon, sausage, beans, hash browns, toast, marmalade, corn flakes, and fresh fruit washed down with...
a gallon of coffee, were now itching to launch into the scientific activities. The morning session comprised invited lectures covering muscle metabolism, then oral presentations on neuromuscular disease. The afternoon was dedicated to lively poster sessions, delegates consuming the knowledge and findings of their peers with great voracity. But still they were hungry for more, and, thanks to Sarepta Therapeutics they were able to enjoy more learning at a symposium in the evening.

The great congress binge continued on Friday morning with invited speeches and oral presentations on immune-mediated peripheral nerve, neuromuscular junction and muscle disorders. Packed into a lunchtime session courtesy of PTC Therapeutics, delegates were treated to a second symposium before the afternoon’s guided poster discussions. And if muscle aficionados were still craving myo-knowledge nourishment, they were welcome to join in for a third symposium in the evening hosted by Biomarin Pharmaceutical Inc., after which the fuelling of the intellect might be replaced by feeding the body at one of Brighton’s numerous local restaurants offering every nationality of food conceivable.

Saturday morning and congress participants flocked to the Brighton Dome once more to listen to invited lectures on advances in treatments for muscle disease and oral presentations on the pathophysiology neuromuscular disease. The feast of learning continued at lunchtime with the 4th symposium of the congress, courtesy of Genzyme.

But now for a break in the academic activities, and time to snap up some fresh air and explore the environs beyond the city. Ever mindful of our delegates’ need for diversionary activity on occasions, organisers Ros Quinlivan and Francesco Muntoni ensured the well-being of their congress guests by organising coaches for a congress outing to visit the very English Arundel Castle a number of miles out of town in the rolling Sussex countryside. One could learn something of the history of this restored medieval edifice, home of the Dukes of Norfolk, and in addition obtain some gentle cardiovascular activity wondering through the many corridors and rooms of the castle and its neatly lawned gardens.

Sun descending in the hazy skies, coaches ferried their myo-passengers back into town and to the hotels where they could prepare for further socialising and celebration at the grand Gala Dinner to be held at the Hilton on the seafront. Check out the ladies’ sparkly dresses, clutch bags, stilettos, twinsets and pearls, glamorous hairstyles; the gents’ tuxedos, dickie-bows and gelled hair. . . . the very glamorous alter-egos of these professionals, quite a contrast to the white lab coats, protective goggles and pipette syringes in hand or stethoscope draped round the neck. Myologists in evening wear congregated at the Hilton and made their way to the ballroom balcony and sipped pre-prandial glasses of bubbly, overlooking the expansive dining and dance hall, illuminated with vivid coloured party lights and candles.

Moving downstairs to the party room, guests took their seats and sported party hats and launched party-poppers while tooting on whistling party cones. The wine soon began flowing in torrents. Moving around the floor, cartoon artist, “Tom” entertained guests, sketching caricatures of some brave volunteers. Very soon food was served: to whet the appetite, starters of avocado mousse with layered beef tomatoes, and croutes with olive and balsamic glaze. For the main course, the ultimate traditional English seaside dish: battered fish and lemon wedge, with chips in a bucket and the obligatory mushy peas. And for dessert a “Brighton Rock Trio” of cheesecake served with candylfloss and honeycomb, a mini toffee apple and a mini donut topped with raspberry compote.

Happily satiated guest then watched on as Ros Quinlivan heralded the entrance of the 20th anniversary birthday cake, specially commissioned and highly idiosyncratic, a beach scene with two figurines that seemed to represent two very familiar members of WMS: one perched on the end of a sunbed busily typing on his laptop; the second relaxed in sunglasses and lying on a beach towel sunbathing in a rather fetching jade-coloured ‘mankini’ and listening to his iPod.

The celebrations continued as some WMS members, who had managed to attend all 20 WMS congresses, were called to the stage to rapturous applause and posed for a group photograph. Our ten “twenty-timers” are: Marianne de Visser, Victor Dubowitz, David Hilton-Jones, Eugenio Mercuri, Francesco Muntoni, Anders Oldfors, Caroline Sewry, Haluk Topaloglu, Jiri Vajsar and Thomas Voit. Congratulations on this achievement!

This year for the first time there was a further honour, a Lifetime Achievement Award, in recognition of longevity of service to the muscle cause. Ros Quinlivan and Francesco Muntoni were delighted to present this award to Caroline Sewry who had devoted her career to muscle research, and continues to commit her time and knowledge to nurture the young, ascending myologists.

Francesco Muntoni then entertained the crowd by presenting an extended slide show to embarrass the President – or possibly vice versa? And finally, a large presentation to one Victor Dubowitz, President and co-founder of the World Muscle Society, and his wife and “rock”, Lilly. This enduring partnership had produced four humanoid progenies, and in due course the WMS, their “fifth child”. Lovers of art and architecture, Victor and Lilly were honoured to receive an abstract painting entitled “A New Rhythm” by contemporary British artist, Richard White. This intricate and dynamic mix of colour and pattern will no doubt fire their inspiration for new ideas as they gaze upon it in contemplation.

Now, however, was not the time for quiet contemplation. Muscle party animals bounded onto the dance floor as the band Big Mama Funk turned up the volume and blasted out their super-energetic dance numbers. Having exercised the intellect in recent days, muscle fans were pulling out all the stops to demonstrate their physical capabilities as they exercised muscle and absorbed the rhythm of the big band on a packed dance floor. Midnight struck and the party came to a close. Tired but contented myo-revellers shuffled off the dance floor, one or two with sore feet or a limp, but all in a good cause. They would have time to recover for a few hours overnight pending the final stage of the congress myo-medley on Sunday.

The sun rose and promised another bright and fresh autumnal day for the closing day. The morning offered
oral presentations on the advances in treatment of neuromuscular disorders, followed by selected poster highlights after morning coffee. After lunch, the late breaking oral presentations generated some lively debate and food for thought as the academic sessions of the congress drew to a close.

And so to the climax of the congress for many an ascending myologist, dreaming of the dizzy heights of muscle stardom, the announcement of the prize winners, who were called to the stage to receive their certificates.

This year’s worthy recipients were:

for the President’s Prize for Young Myologist of the Year (500 euros):
Edoardo Malfatti. GO 5 – A premature stop codon in MYO18B is associated with severe nemaline myopathy with cardiomyopathy

for the President’s Prize for Best First-Timer (500 euros):
Jean Seto. GO 2 – A gene for speed: the influence of ACTN3 on muscle performance in health and disease

for the Léa Rose Spinal Muscular Atrophy Award (500 euros):
Happy Birthday Dear WMS!

Congress delegates always like a good party and plenty of dancing. In addition to the energising dinner and free flowing wine organisers laid on great entertainment including live music and a caricaturist for this anniversary celebration.
Congratulations to the prizewinners for whom hours of peering down a microscope or nurturing cell cultures past midnight has finally paid dividends. Appreciation in abundance to Ros Quinlivan and Francesco Muntoni with their “right hand man” Clare Beach for their endeavours in securing the success of the congress. Receiving the flag for Granada, Carmen Navarro demonstrates her muscle tone as she lifts the weighty Myogenesis above her head.
The Duchenne Research Fund Prize (500 euros):
Caroline Le Guiner. GO 25 – Adeno-associated virus vector (AAV) microdystrophin gene therapy prolongs survival and restores muscle function in the canine model of Duchenne muscular dystrophy (DMD)

And for the six Elsevier Prizes of 500 euros:
Belinda Cowling: GO 21 – Reducing dynamin 2 rescues a severe congenital myopathy in mice.
Maaike van Putten: GP 164 – Natural history study of mouse models for limb girdle muscular dystrophy, types 2D and 2F. 
Payam Mohassel: GP 268 – Col6A2 null mice are a new mouse model of collagen-VI related dystrophies and relevant to the human disease.
A. Reghan Foley: LBO 02 – GGPS1 mutations cause a unique childhood-onset muscular dystrophy associated with sensorineural deafness and primary ovarian failure in females.
Dimuthu Wasgewatte Wijesinghe: GP 104 – Investigation of the sources of osteopontin required for normal regeneration of injured muscle.

In addition, twenty Elsevier Runner-up Prizes comprising one year’s subscription to WMS including journal Neuromuscular Disorders, were awarded to:

Hearty congratulations to all the prize winners for their excellent achievements! We wish them all the very best in their careers and look forward to seeing them return to the WMS congress in future years.

Finally, special certificates were awarded to our industrious and indefatigable local organsers, Ros Quinlivan and Francesco Muntoni, and to the truly remarkable Clare Beach and her fantastic support team at Azure Event Ltd, who triumphantly took on all logistical and administrative challenges with great resilience and professionalism where most would have crumbled!

All that remained now was to pass on the golden WMS flag to the encumbents of next year’s congress, 2016, in Granada, Spain. Ros Quinlivan and Francesco Muntoni held each end of the flag as Carmen Navarro raised with gusto and defiance the weighty “Myogenesis” sculpture above her head. Roll on Granada!

For more pictures from Brighton as well as further information about the 2016 congress in Granada, please go to the WMS website: http://worldmusclesociety.org.

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