

Exceptional impact

The founding meeting of the International Association of Contact Lens Educators took place in Monaco in November 1979. **Dr Shehzad Naroo** and **Alison Ewbank** trace the early years of the organisation, now celebrating the start of its 40th year



Events across two continents in the mid-1970s were instrumental in the formation of IACLE. In the USA, contact lens educators from across North America held their first official meeting in Chicago in 1974.

In Europe, Bausch & Lomb organised the first European Soft Contact Lens Research Symposium, in Edinburgh the following year. The aim was to bring international contact lens practitioners together to learn from each other's clinical experiences of soft contact lenses and to be a platform for presenting the latest research.

Four years later, these two initiatives came together to create another new organisation. B&L held its European symposium in Monte Carlo and invited along contact lens educators to explore interest in forming an international association of contact lens educators.

During the symposium – held on 4-5 November 1979 – a lively exchange took place on how contact lens education was structured and executed in these various countries.

INAUGURAL MEETING

Educators held a meeting the following day and agreed to establish what was to become IACLE. About 16 attended, from the UK, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Spain, Switzerland and Germany, and also from the US, Australia, South Africa and Canada, all representing their colleges/schools and teaching programs.

Australian researcher Brien Holden was present, and the B&L representative, who acted as facilitator, was George Mertz. From the UK, delegates were Richard Pearson (City University) and Don Loran (University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology).

Three major areas of interest were:

- Comparing curricula of contact lens education
- Exchanging educational materials
- Sharing didactic methods and courses on various contact lens topics

B&L offered to facilitate these



Educators attending IACLE meeting at the B&L European Research Symposium in Vienna in 1985 included president Hilmar Bussacker (left), vice-president Brien Holden (centre) and secretary Don Loran (right)

exchanges, while educators and institutions would organise the content of events. A similar educational meeting was planned for the next B&L European symposium, to be held in London.

Educators from around the world would be invited to join the meeting and bring 35mm slides to be incorporated into a bank of educational slides that could be used by all future members of IACLE. Swiss educator Hilmar Bussacker would look into the legal formation of IACLE and John de Brabander from the Netherlands would organise the exchange of materials.

OFFICIAL FOUNDATION

This second meeting was in October 1980 in London, when a Contact Lens Educators' Seminar was held alongside B&L's Third European Symposium on Soft Contact Lenses.

It was agreed that membership of the new association would be open to all educators responsible for teaching contact lens fitting at a recognised training institution. The purpose was to exchange information in the contact lens field. And IACLE was to be independent and non-political.

The first exchange of slides on the subject of corneal changes due to contact lens wear took place during the London meeting. B&L also contributed slides. Slit-lamp photography, endothelial imaging and

techniques for reproducing educational materials were discussed.

The 25 participants from 13 different countries commented very positively on the event and agreed to meet yearly. Voted onto the board for the first two years were president Bussacker, from Switzerland, vice-president Holden from Australia, and secretary de Brabander.

IACLE was officially founded.

DRIVING FORCE

Richard Franz took over the organisation of the B&L symposium in 1981, in Torremolinos. Franz worked on events in Amsterdam (1982), Athens (1983) and Interlaken (1984). Meetings followed in Vienna (1985) and Nice (1986).

Holden wanted to bring together educators from around Europe at these meetings. The aim was to achieve more consistency in what was being taught in contact lenses, and to help educators keep up to date with technology.

According to Franz, Holden was a 'driving force' behind the IACLE meetings during this time. But Franz also says that the nature of the annual meetings at the European symposium was still evolving. 'For a while [the IACLE meeting] was more of a social gathering than a hard-core educational event,' he observes.

IACLE's first president, Bussacker, →

IACLE

and Australian researcher and educator Deborah Sweeney, played prominent roles. From the Vienna meeting in 1985, Loran took over as secretary. Sweeney's early role was to reproduce slide sets and collect information from members about what was happening in their countries. From 1990, she became assistant secretary.

The meetings were initially hosted and supported financially by B&L. Later other multinational contact lens companies that were subsequently invited to support IACLE.

LONG-TERM COMMITMENT

Juan-Carlos Aragón joined B&L's professional services team in 1985 and attended his first European symposium in Barcelona in 1987. The following year he organised the symposium in Berlin, where around 25 educators attended the IACLE event.

Aragón's view was that longer term commitment was needed to invest in IACLE's future so in 1989 B&L began a four-year investment in IACLE sponsorship totalling US\$1m.

IACLE meetings continued to take place every autumn to coincide with the B&L symposium, in Edinburgh (1989), Sorrento (1990), Geneva (1991) and Bordeaux (1992).

At the Geneva meeting, Bussacker and Loran were presented with the first IACLE Awards for Outstanding Contributions to Contact Lens Education, as were B&L's president of its international division Ronald L Zarrella, and Aragón. Holden was elected as the new president and a new constitution was drafted, the principal amendment being the establishment of a regional structure.

That year, IACLE is recorded as having 50 members in 15 countries, and delivering 30 educational programs to 600 students worldwide.

GLOBAL STRUCTURE

A crucial year for IACLE was 1992. Office bearers at this time included president Holden, vice-president Fonn, secretary Sweeney and treasurer Charline Gauthier. Luigina Sorbara and Nathan Efron were assistant secretary and assistant treasurer. The association now had four regional groups: Europe, Africa-Middle East, Asia Pacific and Latin America, each with its own regional president.

Initially IACLE had held just one annual meeting, in Europe, but from 1990 regional and national meetings had been set up, often held in conjunction with other major scientific and research symposia. During 1992, IACLE regional meetings took place



IACLE's first paid employee, Sylvie Sulaiman (left), with Des Fonn, Brien Holden and Pamela O'Brien

in Colombia, the Philippines and France.

At the same time, IACLE gained new corporate donors. By mid-1992 it was receiving financial support from CIBA Vision, Allergan and Johnson & Johnson, in addition to its continuing major sponsorship from B&L.

Introduced that same year was the IACLE Educator Fellowship Program, to provide educators with exposure to contact lens education and research at other institutions, and so broaden their experience.

IACLE also drafted Minimum Standards for Contact Lens Education that would form the basis for a planned IACLE Contact Lens Syllabus. And it announced its intention to establish IACLE Accreditation, the forerunner of Fellowship of IACLE (FIACLE).

FIRST EMPLOYEES

Another milestone for IACLE was reached in 1992 with the appointment of IACLE's first paid employee, Sylvie Sulaiman, as education manager. Based in Australia, Sulaiman was brought in to commission contact lens modules and materials to provide educators with everything they needed for teaching contact lenses.

Prior to joining IACLE, Sulaiman had been closely involved in the Asia Pacific Contact Lens Education Program (APCLEP), a B&L-funded initiative of the Cornea and Contact Lens Research Unit (CCLRU) in Sydney.

APCLEP materials were already translated into four languages so were initially used as a base for IACLE's resources. Work then began on what was to become IACLE's most important resource: the IACLE Contact Lens Course.

Meanwhile, IACLE's presence in Asia was increasing. By the end of 1992, 51 of IACLE's 130 members were in the AP region. Europe followed with 41 members, while there were 17 in North America, 16 in Latin America and five in Africa-Middle East.

SYDNEY SECRETARIAT

Pamela O'Brien worked part-time for IACLE in 1990, just as it was beginning to gain momentum. In 1992 she was appointed global coordinator, working from an office in the US, and within a year she was employed full time.

The association's secretariat was to be based at the Randwick Campus of the University of New South Wales in Sydney. Sandy Hunt-Sharman was appointed as executive director and Yvette Waddell came on board, progressing to director of administration.

Waddell recalls that in 1993 the small IACLE team was given a portable office that was used for storage. 'On our first day, Sandy and I opened the door to this shed and it was full of boxes – we couldn't get in there. We didn't even have a desk or a telephone – nothing. But it all came together.'

Commenting on those early days, Waddell says it was when money was spent on it that IACLE started to 'grow legs':

'IACLE was a real innovator in its time with its education model: how it handled educators, students, researchers, clinicians and industry personnel. It was a pretty inspirational business model too.'

Addressing the needs of educators – and through them students, the clinicians of the future – was attractive to the industry supporting IACLE. It was also an opportunity for industry personnel to network with IACLE members.

EXPONENTIAL GROWTH

The impetus from Aragón and B&L was the driver for Holden to convince the contact lens industry to contribute – financially and in-kind – to the cause of raising the standard of contact lens education, particularly in developing countries. Others on the executive board, especially Sweeney and Fonn, assisted Holden in obtaining the industry's commitment to IACLE, resulting in an exponential growth of membership and activities.

What had started as a 'mates' club' in Europe grew into an organisation that was to extend its reach all around the world.

In fact, over four decades, this one organisation has brought together a total of 2,500 members in 91 countries, who have reached as many as 170,000 students. IACLE estimates that more than 250 million patients have experienced the benefits of contact lenses and improved quality of life as a result. ●

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