

Through the eyes of the beholder: My view of the history of the SEMDSA

I was encouraged to join the Society for Endocrinology, Metabolism and Diabetes of South Africa (SEMDSA) in 1971 as a medical registrar who had developed an interest in Endocrinology. At that time, the fledgling society, only six years old, had already been home to a number of individuals who had moved on to greener pastures overseas. In particular, both Arthur Rubenstein and Irving Spitz went on to establish enormous international reputations.

I attended my first SEMDSA Congress, the seventh annual meeting, in 1972. I remember the meeting very well. It took place in the main lecture auditorium of the old University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) Medical School building. The audience consisted of a total of 18 members. The delegation from Wits Medical School consisted of Prof Harry Seftel, Prof Barry Joffe, Julius Sagel, the late Drs Sol Lopic and Leon Klugman, and I.

A Cape Town delegation, consisting of the late Bernard Pimstone and his team of Arthur (now Aaron) Vinnik, Solly Epstein, and a young Bob Millar, together with a few young researchers, including Derek le Roith and Michael Sheppard from the very strong Endocrine Division of the University of Cape Town, made up the remainder of the audience. WPU Jackson, who was a major international figure in his own right and a staunch supporter of SEMDSA, missed that meeting. Representatives from Pretoria and Bloemfontein were notable by their absence, and in my political naivety at the time, I never questioned why delegates from Durban were not present. This was corrected over the ensuing years, and our colleagues from Natal, as it was then, soon became an integral part of the SEMDSA family. I presented my first paper entitled, *Thyroid function in osteogenesis imperfecta* at that meeting and remember facing a torrid interrogation from Arthur Vinnik.

In 1974, I was elected, rather against my will, if I remember it correctly, onto the Executive Committee (Excom) of SEMDSA. I believe that this was because there was no one else who was young or stupid enough to take on the task of organising that year's annual meeting. Although I did not know it at the time, I was to remain on the SEMDSA Excom for the next 18 years. In that year, the Excom consisted of Bernard Pimstone as President, Harry Seftel, Barry Joffe, Francois Bonnici and I. We had increased our number to 28 for that meeting, but owing to the small number of SEMDSA members, we combined with the South African Gastroenterology Society at the University of

Pretoria. We invited our first invited international speaker, David Streeten, who spoke on mineralocorticoids.

In 1975, we combined our annual congress with that of the South African Renal Society, and hosted Lou Aveoli, an expert in calcium metabolism, as our international speaker. By 1976, we were able to boast an attendance of 80, and we felt strong enough to "go it alone". I remained on the Excom of SEMDSA until 1994, during which time the society grew slowly, but steadily. Following the 1982 congress, SEMDSA encountered real financial troubles. We had underestimated the costs of the meeting, and found ourselves in the "red" by R20 000, a significant sum of money in those days. It fell on my shoulders, as the then Treasurer of the society, to resolve this. Enter Novo Nordisk Pharmaceutical Industries (Novo Pharma in those days), who agreed to "bail" SEMDSA out by settling the debt, and also offered to provide secretarial assistance to SEMDSA and ongoing support for the congress. Josie Brett initially achieved this with the support of Shelley Harris, and then, in 1991, Shelley eventually assumed the huge and often-unappreciated secretariat role on her own. Between 1985 and 1994, she and I worked together, and she provided invaluable support, initially to me as Treasurer and Chairman of SEMDSA, but also to the subsequent SEMDSA Excoms. Over the years, we had our ups and downs. I remember organising one meeting at Sun City, which I felt would be a wonderful venue. In those days, it was still part of Bophuthatswana, the infamous "homeland" of the apartheid state. Once again, my political naivety became apparent as this choice of venue resulted in the meeting being boycotted by most of our Natal members. This still remains one of the great embarrassments of my career.

Soon after Novo Nordisk started providing secretarial assistance to SEMDSA, the first Novo Award was established. Jeff Wing was the first recipient. In those years, we always organised a side trip to one of the game parks for our overseas speakers. These were always appreciated and enjoyed by our visitors.

Over subsequent years, a small group, consisting primarily of Prof Francois Bonnici, the late Prof Stephen Hough, Prof Bob Millar and I, assumed the helm at SEMDSA, alternating among ourselves in holding the chair. However, in the 1980s, we decided that the constitution of SEMDSA needed revision, a task which I undertook. The Excom was enlarged and formalised. This led to a much more democratic SEMDSA, and Prof Willie Mollentze, Martin

Abrahamson, Prof MAK Omar, Mo Seedat and Prof Roy Shires, among others, all became active in the society. By the late 1980s, some “new blood” was elected to the SEMDSA Excom, which included Prof Ayesha Motala and Prof Naomi (Dinky) Levitt.

The 1993 SEMDSA Congress in Durban was the last in which I was involved, being Chairman at that time. At the Excom meeting prior to this Congress, it was decided that some of the “old hands” should step down and make way for younger individuals. Since SEMDSA was perceived as an academic society, the committee felt that as a private practitioner and after 18 years on the SEMDSA Excom, I should stand down, and not make myself available for re-election. At that time, SEMDSA had grown from the humble beginnings described herein, to a membership of 280, with a very positive bank balance. That year marked my departure from active participation in SEMDSA, and unfortunately marked the start of an unnecessary and unhelpful polarisation between the private and academic sectors. Attempts to mend this divide only began when Aslam Amod took over the reins of SEMDSA in 2012, and the situation is still ongoing.

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Key SEMDSA figures from 1971-1993:

- *Julius Sagel*: Julius worked at the University of the Witwatersrand for three years before returning to the University of Charleston, South Carolina, where he became a professor at the Medical University of South Carolina College of Medicine.
- *Bernard Pimstone*: Bernard was Head of Endocrinology and Professor of Medicine at the University of Cape Town, with a massive international reputation. He was one of the doyens of Endocrinology in our country, and a true international giant in the field. Unfortunately, he died at a young age in 1981.
- *Aaron Vinnik*: Aaron was Director of Research at the Neuroendocrine Unit, Murray Waitzer Endowed Chair for Diabetes Research, Eastern Virginia Medical

School. He is currently a world authority on diabetic neuropathy.

- *Solly Epstein*: After a stellar academic career, Solly is now practising as an endocrinologist in Philadelphia.
- *Bob Millar*: Bob was Director of the South African Medical Research Council's Regulatory Peptides Research Unit and Dean (Research), of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Cape Town, until 1998. He then moved to the UK, where he took up the position of Director, Medical Research Council Human Reproductive Sciences Unit, and Centre for Reproductive Biology, Edinburgh; and Professor, Division of Reproductive and Developmental Sciences, University of Edinburgh. He returned to South Africa in 2011, and now heads up the University of Cape Town/Medical Research Centre research group for receptor biology. Currently, he is also Editor-in-Chief of *Neuroendocrinology*.
- *Derek le Roith*: Derek is Director of Research in the Division of Endocrinology, Diabetes and Bone Diseases, at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York. He is also Editor-in-Chief of *Growth Hormone and IGF Research, Endocrine Practice, and Endocrinology Clinics of North America*, and Associate Editor of *Diabetes Care and Hormone Metabolic Research*.
- *Michael Sheppard*: Michael became the William Withering Professor of Medicine, Head of the Division of Medical Sciences, Dean of the Medical School, and Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University of Birmingham. He is currently Provost and Vice Principal of the same.
- *WPU Jackson*: WPU was head of Diabetes at the University of Cape Town, and was affiliated to the Massachusetts General Hospital Boston, Massachusetts. He was another giant in his field, and placed South Africa on the international map during the heyday of Endocrinology at the University of Cape Town.
- *Martin Abrahamson*: Martin moved to Boston, and became Medical Director and Chief Physician of the Joslin Diabetes Centre; and Associate Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School.