

Newsletter No: 186 February 2005



Society for Reproduction and Fertility

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SRF Chairman's Thoughts

This is my last newsletter report before my term of office finishes in April. I have been immensely lucky in being supported by an excellent Council during my time as Chairman. We have had to deal with a number of very difficult issues, not least of which has been the closure of the Cambridge office and establishing the publication of Reproduction through BioScientifica, and membership matters through Procon. This transition has not been without its difficulties, and I know that a number of members have been less than satisfied with some aspects of these changes. I would remind all the membership that without these changes SRF would now be facing a very uncertain future, with our financial resources dwindling in the face of escalating costs of continuing to run SRF through the Cambridge set up. Now SRF is on a secure financial footing, BUT, there is no room for complacency.

The changing nature of publishing and restrictions on library spending may still hit sales of Reproduction. I urge you, as SRF members, to ensure that your libraries continue to purchase Reproduction. Publication must be run at a break-even, if not profitable position. Impressive progress has been made with the journal, with increased submissions and more high quality papers being published. Thank you John Carroll and your team of editors, and the staff at BioScientifica who have continued the hard work put into this by Bob Webb. The introduction of Highwire, although initially expensive, has been a crucial investment ensuring that Reproduction maintains as high a profile as possible.

At present we are re-examining the membership database and have been contacting individuals who still have not renewed their subscriptions. Can you please check that you have paid your subscription for 2005? I realise that a number of you may have had problems over the past year or two, and for this we apologise unreservedly. To ensure that these problems do not recur, we are having one last attempt to finally rectify this situation.

Fertility 2005, has an excellent program but as we speak, registrations are not as healthy as we would like. Tony Michael has done an excellent job in maintaining the standards of the meetings, and I thank him for all his help, as he finishes his long stint as Programme Secretary.

We have begun to sponsor workshops as an alternative means of supporting members. The recent member survey for the future of SRF, including the nature of meetings was equivocal, as one might expect, but most of you supported the concept of workshops. The joint meetings with our European colleagues have been relatively successful, but we still need to determine whether these meetings fulfil our needs. Support for summer students and travel grants remain an important part of our remit, and long may this continue.

I must thank Amanda Pickard for all her hard work as General Secretary guiding us through the stormy waters of the changes in SRF function in recent years, Bruce Campbell and Lisa Thurston for chairing the Education Committee, and Joanne Murray for chairing Publications Committee. In particular, I wish to thank Keith Jones who has overseen the enormous changes in our financial

arrangements. This has been time consuming and the SRF is now beginning to benefit, which makes running the Society simpler than in the past. Finally I wish to thank all the members of Council with whom I have worked in the past several years, and you the members for continuing to support the Society. There have been some very bad times, but on the whole I am pleased with what we have achieved, and wish the new Council the very best for the future.

Alan McNeilly, February 2005

From the Treasurer

As I write this, the audited accounts for 2004 are in preparation for the AGM in April. Full Council of Management reports will accompany them, but a number of points can be highlighted here. Firstly, the restructuring of the Society which commenced at the beginning of 2003 appears to be bearing fruit. Although it was painful to lose the dedicated staff at Newmarket Road, the Society now looks in much better financial shape to cope with whatever the future may throw at it. We have a very good working relationship with BioScientifica, who manage Reproduction admirably and are very much in tune with promoting the journal. Furthermore, some of the initiatives (such as the introduction of Highwire, focus issues etc.) instigated by John Carroll are producing an improved quality journal. Hopefully these changes and the enticement of free colour in manuscripts will encourage everyone to consider publishing their work in Reproduction ahead of all of its competitor journals. The Society secretariat is also being run well by Procon Conferences Ltd, who have been the main contact point for members. Subscription renewals, grant applications and vacation scholarships are now administered by them.

Nevertheless, some issues still give us cause for concern. Institutional subscriptions to Reproduction formerly provided JRF Ltd. with much needed revenue for its charitable activities, and wise strategies from previous Councillors allowed JRF to amass a good sized nest egg (that currently stands at around £1.5 million in investments). However, the uptake of the journal currently decreases by 5-10% per year which has led to a marked fall in our income. Production costs have remained at a similar level, but we now spend approximately the same amount of money producing the journal as we receive in subscriptions. The largest fall in subscriptions occurred in 2001, when the journal changed its name and unfortunately these 'lost' subscriptions were not chased. With BioScientifica's help we are trying to reverse this trend and develop strategies that may buffer us from further Institutional attrition. As individual members, all I can do is urge you to make sure your Institute subscribes to Reproduction.

Conferences also give us constant cause for concern. Tony Michael is still sourcing a venue for our 2006 stand-alone conference because our abiding aim is to make sure that the meeting is much more affordable for members, allowing them to take their lab to it.

Finally, Martin Luck from the University of Nottingham is nominated to take over from me as Treasurer at the forthcoming AGM. I strongly urge you to support this proposal. I would like to thank all of the other members of Council who are also standing down at this AGM. Alan McNeilly has worked extremely hard as Chair of the Society and has



always given me great support. He will be a tough act to follow. Tony Michael is stepping down as Programme Secretary. It is a mystery to me why he hasn't been dismissed by the Royal Free Hospital for the amount of time he has devoted to the job! Finally also thanks are needed to Amanda Pickard as General Secretary who has worked very hard in making sure things get done, and getting people organised – tasks that should stand her in good stead over the next year. I encourage all of you to stand for election to the Council of Management. The Society exists only for the benefit of its members, and Council is in need of people who are willing to put some of their time and enthusiasm for Reproductive Biology into the running of the Society.

Keith Jones, January 2005

From the General Secretary

Like our Chairman (Alan McNeilly), our Treasurer (Keith Jones) and our Programme Secretary (Tony Michael), I too will be unable to stand for re-election to office at the next AGM in Warwick. The Articles of Association of the Society require that Council members and Officers served for limited periods to ensure that the business and charitable activities of the Society are regularly reviewed. It seems like only yesterday that was elected to the post of General Secretary, but such a lot has changed in the meantime.

At the time of my election, the merger of JRF and SSF was almost completed, so it was exciting to be involved with establishing the new joint organization. However, it was not long before it became apparent that yet further radical changes were required for the Society to survive. Throughout the period we have continued to progress and develop, with a fantastic new-look journal, a new website and a revised business structure. I certainly never anticipated so many changes would take place, but am confident that they are all for the better.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the friends and colleagues who have given up so much of their time to running the Society over recent years, particularly Alan McNeilly, for keeping us focused on the task in hand. Council members carry out their duties voluntarily, but I have personally found that this is very rewarding. Please do consider standing for election to Council; the Society cannot exist without a core of people willing to carry out this role.

I am looking forward to catching up with the progress of the Society and its members at future conferences and workshops.

Amanda R. Pickard, February 2005

Marshall Medal

The 2005 recipient of the Marshall Medal will be Prof. Paul Watson of the Royal Veterinary College. Paul will be presented with the Medal at the Fertility 2005 Conference Dinner.

Council is always happy to receive nominations for future Marshall Medallists and for the SRF Distinguished Scientist award. Each should take the form of a letter of commendation accompanied by an abridged CV for the candidate detailing:

the area of expertise of the nominee

major contributions of the nominee to the field of reproductive biology

details of any professional honours already bestowed on the nominee

an outline of the publication record of the nominee (total number of papers, indicating year of first publication)

Although nominations can be made by any individual member of the Society (irrespective of non-statutory or statutory status), the letter of commendation should list other members of the Society prepared to formally endorse the nomination.

In the first instance, nominations for the above awards should be submitted to the SRF Programme Secretary via the Business Office.

Travel Grants and Vacation Scholarships

All non-statutory members of the Society are eligible to apply for travel grants to attend conferences organised by the SRF or other bodies. For further information including an online application form, please visit the website (<http://www.srf-reproduction.org>) or contact the SRF Business Office.

The Society also sponsors Vacation Scholarships which help to fund promising undergraduate students who wish to carry out research projects in their Easter or summer holidays. If you have a project, or know of a suitable student please visit the website for further information about how to apply.

From the Programme Secretary

The next SRF Annual Conference, to be held jointly with the BAS and BFS, is fast approaching (University of Warwick, Coventry, 3–6 April 2005; see: <http://www.jointukfertility.co.uk>). We hope to see lots of SRF members there, but the number of abstracts submitted suggests that this fourth joint conference of the UK Fertility Societies may not be as well supported as its predecessors. As the majority of respondents to last year's Conference Survey indicated widespread support for the joint conferences, with some suggesting that these should be held annually rather than biennially, we assume that the decrease in abstracts reflects:

(1) the continuing trend of declining support for conferences, shared by several learned societies (2) the perception that the costs of attending "Fertility 2005" are very much higher than those of previous Joint UK Fertility Society Conferences.

Regarding concern (2), several SRF members (including some members of SRF Council) have challenged the organisation of conferences that cost more than £200 per delegate; a figure favoured in the recent members' survey. There are a number of issues underlying the rising price of conferences, which make it hard to foresee how SRF can organise conferences (either alone or with partners) that are affordable to members without being heavily subsidised by sponsors and/or from SRF reserves.

Declining Support for SRF Conferences

In recent years, the number of Society members attending the annual conference has declined dramatically. Some reasons for this include: decreased research in reproduction/fertility; decreased funds and time to attend conferences; increasing numbers of conferences (particularly specialist meetings) which often offer better value for money; the rising price of SRF meetings. Furthermore, moving the conference to March/April has proved unpopular with those members who attend the BSAS or BES conferences at Easter. However, reverting to holding SRF conferences in July will not be possible while we continue to organise joint conferences with ACE and BFS, whose members attend the annual ESHRE conference in June/July. Indeed, the majority of SRF members responding to the Conference Survey identified ESHRE and SSR (rather than BSAS or BES) as an annual conference that they regularly attend, despite expressing a preference to return to SRF conferences in early July.

All conferences have fixed costs which must be met from the registration fees (such as venue hire, AV costs, and the production of an abstract book). Unfortunately, with fewer attendees, the cost per



delegate must rise to meet these. Prices for Fertility 2005 were set to cover costs on the conservative assumption of 400 delegates. However, the revised projection is nearer 250-300 delegates. Therefore, (a) SRF will suffer financial losses from Fertility 2005, and (b) we will be forced to calculate higher prices for 2007 based on an assumption of only 300 (rather than 400) delegates. In order for conference fees to stabilise (or ideally to come down!), we need to be able to be certain of higher delegate numbers. No Programme Secretary or Treasurer can take the risk of setting cheaper registration fees in the hope that this will attract more delegates; the risk to the Society's funds is simply too great.

Rising University Prices

A major factor in the rising costs of SRF Conferences is that Universities now charge commercial rates for all conferences, with larger venues charging higher rates (*see below*). For example, the University of York – the venue for the first joint UK meeting in 1997 and provisional venue for Fertility 2007 – has improved its facilities over the past 10 years. However, to pay for those improvements, the University now charges much higher rates such that, within one decade, York may no longer be a suitable venue on financial grounds. The Joint Executive, which oversees the joint conferences, are still reviewing options, but current indications are that delegate prices for a joint conference in York in 2007 would be comparable to those which we have been forced to charge for Warwick. We are acutely aware that many SRF members cannot pay these prices, even allowing for the introduction of "full economic costing" on research grants.

One important consideration is the cost of accommodation for delegates. In this area, University prices have risen markedly, with many Universities now charging rates comparable to, or more expensive than, local hotels. SRF could adopt the same strategy as other Societies who set their registration fees on a "non-residential" basis and require delegates to book (and possibly even source) their own accommodation. It would certainly be possible to arrange conferences on a non-residential basis with registration fees of under £200 per delegate provided that we can identify affordable venues that would take a conference booking without linked accommodation. However, in my opinion, this would not only artificially limit the apparent cost of attending a conference, but it would also sacrifice the opportunity for delegates to interact over breakfast/evening meals/in the bar, outside of the conference sessions. In short, I don't think it would still be an SRF meeting if delegates weren't staying together "on campus".

Joint Conferences = Larger Venues = Higher Costs

There seems to be widespread support within SRF for joint conferences to be organised biennially, if not annually, with ACE/BAS/BFS. Furthermore it seems likely that in 2008, SRF will partner SSR and SRB in an international joint congress of reproduction, possibly in Hawaii. Inevitably, joint conferences require larger venues, which charge at the upper end of the conference price range. For the Joint UK conferences, we have to select venues like Warwick and York, which can accommodate up to 600 delegates per day to allow for plenary lectures/symposia and up to 5 parallel sessions. While smaller venues are certainly more affordable, they also tend to be limited to coping with less than 300 delegates per day.

Smaller venues could be used for joint conferences (to minimise costs), and the delegate numbers strictly limited to a first come-first served basis. However, I would have problems with a system whereby any SRF member was prevented from attending our Annual Conference, particularly if this was due to members of other societies being in a position to register earlier.

"Willing Academics" versus Professional Conference Organisers

It has been widely assumed that the use of Professional Conference Organisers has increased prices. This is not untrue, so one option would be to return to the old system whereby a "willing academic" conscripts a Local Organising Committee and everything is done "in house" for no apparent fee. Unfortunately, on this basis the cost in terms of time and effort is probably even higher, but the charges are not passed on to the delegates! Few SRF members are now prepared to sacrifice their career by devoting 6-12 months (unaided) to organising conferences. Increased pressure on researchers and initiatives such as the Transparency Review effectively preclude a return to this cheaper option. It is important to keep the cost of PCO's in perspective. Although they can charge £40 to £60 per delegate to manage all aspects of the conference, this is less than 20% of the cost per delegate, and (in my experience) represents excellent value for money. If we did not use a PCO, the job of the next Programme Secretary (let alone any Local Organising Committees) would be completely unmanageable.

Sponsorship / Trade Exhibitions

SRF has always struggled to secure external sponsorship for conferences, so this is a PLEA to those of you that will attend Fertility 2005 to visit the Trade Exhibition. Lack of support for conference exhibitors in the past is another contributing factor to our rising conference fees.

When my term of office finishes at this year's AGM, I had planned to hand my successor some views on the best way forward for SRF meetings. So if anyone has any responses to the points made above, or any alternative ideas on how my successor might organise better (more affordable) conferences, please don't hesitate to contact me with your views (t.michael@rfc.ucl.ac.uk). Thanks in advance for your help.

Tony Michael, January 2005

Membership Renewal

The Society's membership year runs from the 1st January until 31st December. Unfortunately, members who join the Society part way through a year will be served with a renewal notice before they have received 12 months member's benefits. However, in the interests of keeping administration costs to a minimum it is not possible to allow members to renew on the anniversary of their application being approved.

In order to allow members the opportunity to renew, the Members Only area of the website will remain accessible using your existing password until the end of February 2005, when new passwords will be issued to those who have returned their renewal forms. For those who choose to pay by Direct Debit, payment will not be deducted from your account until after this time. If you have any difficulty in renewing your membership, or would like new copies of the renewal form to be issued, please contact the Business Office.

Prof. IW Rowlands

It is with great sadness that we have to report the recent death of Prof IW Rowlands. Prof Rowlands was awarded the Marshall Medal by the then SSF in 1983, in recognition of his research into the reproduction and fertility of equids and exotic species.

We extend our deepest sympathy to his family and colleagues.

Postgradoc's Quiz and Elections

For the first time at Fertility 2005 we are hosting a quiz evening for SRF Postgradoc members, which will be held on Sunday 3rd April after the evening dinner. This is a new and exciting event, which will



provide an excellent opportunity for PhD students and PostDocs from different academic institutions to mix, and also to meet the SRF Council on an informal basis over a few questions and glasses of wine. Plus, there will be prizes and the opportunity to see the SRF council in a whole new light.... We look forward to seeing you there!

On Monday 4th April, at Warwick, a new Postgradoc representative to the Committee will be elected. The representative serves 2 years in office, therefore overlapping with the other Rep for one year and will serve on either the Education or Meetings sub-committees and well as chairing the SRF student prize session. Postgraduate and post-doctoral members of the Society who are interested in standing for election are invited to speak to the members at the lunch, following which a vote will be taken. If you want more information or would like to put yourself or a colleague forward for the position then please contact:

Bob Robinson, University of Nottingham
(Bob.Robinson@nottingham.ac.uk) or **Rachel Webb**, University College, London (r.webb@ucl.ac.uk)

Australian scientist wins top UK award in hormone research

SRF is pleased to congratulate Australian scientist, Professor Jock Findlay on being awarded the 2006 UK Society for Endocrinology Dale Medal. The medal is the highest accolade bestowed by the Society for Endocrinology, and acknowledges excellence in hormone research. Professor Findlay is one of only five Australians to have ever won the award. He was recognised for his contribution to reproductive health research, in particular a better understanding of the ovary, leading to improved knowledge of fertility and treating infertility in women.

Trust for Research and Education in the Biology of Reproduction

The attention of SRF members is drawn to this Trust which was established in 1982, under the management of independent trustees, to award travel and subsistence grants for scientists working in reproductive biology. The Trust was established to meet the needs of those who are ineligible to apply to the SRF for travel funds. Applications will therefore be considered from non-members of the Society for Reproduction and Fertility, and from members of the SRF who are ineligible for travel grants (i.e. Statutory members). Funds may be used for attendance at scientific meetings or to support visits to other laboratories. Applications made by visiting scholars from developing countries are particularly encouraged.

Applications must be sponsored by a member of the Society for Reproduction and Fertility. The maximum grant is £300.

Further information on the Trust and application forms are available from: Prof. APF Flint, TREBR, School of Biosciences, University of Nottingham, Sutton Bonington, Loughborough, Leics LE12 5RD. Tel: 0115 951 6300, Fax: 0115 951 6302, E-mail: Anthony.Flint@Nottingham.ac.uk

Biosciences Federation

The Society for Reproduction and Fertility is an active member of the Biosciences Federation, which represents the views of academics working in the biosciences at the government level. The Federation aims:

To promote liaison, dialogue and interactions within the diverse community of bioscientists on common issues that relate to research and teaching;

To provide opinion and information to assist the formulation of public policy;

To promote wide and open debate, involving the wider public where appropriate, about the practical and ethical issues surrounding developments in the biosciences and their applications.

Recently, Dr Martin Luck was able to attend a members meeting organised by the BSF on behalf of the SRF. He reports that "There was an informative symposium on full economic costing, addressed by significant individuals including Julia Goodfellow (Head of BBRSC) and Keith O'Nions (Head of the Research Councils). I have to say that I was impressed by the influence that BSF seems to wield in high places and I think that SRF should strive to have a presence at all of its meetings. On full economic costing, for example, there was by no means unanimous agreement that this would achieve the universally improved science funding that is intended. The BBRSC and Research Councils, not to mention the government, are still developing their methods and procedures for this and it appeared that the BSF discussion was being listened to. There seems to be money set aside now for reimbursing Universities if charity funding is not provided on an FEC basis - this is the sort of decision which can be heavily influenced by meetings like this."

The BSF subcommittees are also very active, particularly the Animal Sciences Committee. Joanne Murray is the SRF representative on this committee, and Lisa Thurston was able to attend a meeting for Science Communication Officers in November 2004. Further information about its activities and the role of the BSF as a whole can be found at: <http://www.bsf.ac.uk/default.htm>

Council Elections; 2005 AGM

As mentioned elsewhere, a number of Councillors are due to retire from their posts at the forthcoming AGM. The Council of Management is made up of the Officers (Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Treasurer, General Secretary and Programme Secretary), the Editor-in-Chief, the Chairs of the Publications, Meetings and Education and Development Committees and up to four other Councillors nominated by Statutory Members and two Councillors co-opted by Non-Statutory Members. At every AGM, all members of Council must resign, but may stand for re-election by the Statutory members of the Society.

We are seeking nominations for members to be elected or co-opted to Council at the forthcoming AGM in April 2005. Candidates for election must be nominated by **two statutory members** of the Society (contact the General Secretary for details of current statutory members). Candidates for co-option should be proposed and seconded by **two non-statutory members** of the Society. If you would like to nominate a colleague, please contact the Business Office to request a nomination form. Further details of any of the positions vacant are available from the General Secretary. If the number of nominations exceeds the number of vacancies on Council, ballots of the Statutory and Non-Statutory members (respectively) will take place at the AGM.

Honorary Members

Would you like to nominate a colleague for the distinction of becoming an Honorary Member of the Society for Reproduction and Fertility? If you consider someone to be worthy of this tribute, please pass their details forward to the General Secretary, giving justification for your nomination and the name of a second, supporting member of the Society. Proposals for Honorary Membership may be put forward by both Statutory and Non-Statutory members of the Society.