

Historical note on the founding of the European Thyroid Association in Rome, 1965 by one of its two remaining founders.

Jacques-E. Dumont (Institute of Interdisciplinary Research in Human Molecular Biology, University of Brussels), September 2017

As a complement to the remarkable history of the European Thyroid Association published by the ETA (1) I thought it would be interesting to recall the state of mind of its creators at the International Thyroid Congress in Rome in 1965.

Two categories of “creators” were present: the young (30 to 40) researchers at maturity in thyroid gland fundamental biology research (eg N. Salvatore, C. Beckers, J-E Dumont, A. Pinchera, S. Lissitzky, etc.) and the older established professors and heads of laboratories, (J. Roche, R. Pitt Rivers, P.A Bastenie, M. De Visscher, etc.). The former were the real promoters of the concept, the latter the first authorities who conferred the official recognition and were the first ‘official leaders’. I wish here to recall the spirit which animated the first group.

There were two major features and motivations of our ‘young’ group: the feeling of isolation from other Europeans and the overall dominance of the US establishment.

With regard to the first, it is difficult now for a young European to realize how isolated we were. As an example, the first scientist of UCL Louvain (20km from Brussels) that I got to know, C. Beckers, I met as we were both postdocs at the MGH, in Boston. Another example: when the Roche laboratory in Paris received in 1959 a reprint request from the US, they were very excited and wondered who the Boston J-E Dumont was? Etc. Many of the young European founders I first met in Rome in 1965.

Most of us were considered as “exported young fellows” from the US labs where we had made a postdoc. Pinchera, Beckers and myself were considered as derivatives of the Mass General Hospital in Boston, the Napoli group as an extension of the NIH. Only the Roche and Pitt Rivers groups were known as genuine Europeans! At the meeting in Rome we began to know each other and to create links between us.

The second strong feeling shared also by the older bosses, was the total dominance (not as a policy but as a fact) of the US establishment. As speakers, we were chosen, on the basis of US recognition and affiliation.

We therefore decided to create a European society, to meet, collaborate and be an equal partner of the US establishment.

Our basic principles were:

- 1) Open meetings with discussions and friendly competitions
- 2) Established collaborations when possible
- 3) A European sense of humour: “do not be too serious!”

No meeting on thyroid molecular biology was organized in Paris, Marseille, Brussels, or Napoli without any of the four groups. The thyroglobulin story gave rise to information being exchanged at these meetings .

Examples of humour:

Around 1967 both Napoli and Brussels Groups were trying to identify and isolate the thyroglobulin synthesizing polysomes. The results were presented at the ETA meeting in Marseille . The Brussels group found some polysomes made of 80 ribosomes and assuming that any artefactual hydrolyses would lead to shorter samples, assumed that the Tg synthesizing polysomes would be the 80 heavy ones. The Napoli group mostly found 5 ribosomes polysomes and concluded that these were the Tg synthesizing ones. During the discussion I asked the young Italian researcher how many polysomes he had counted. Nino Salvatore jumped on the microphone and to the general laughter of the audience said: "More than you Jacques!"

As chairman of a session at the Vancouver International meeting at 2pm I noticed that S. Lissitzky, after a good French lunch, fell asleep immediately after the beginning of the first talk, to wake up as the light came at the end. As there was no question , I asked "I am sure that Professor Lissitzky has a question!" Serge who did not even know what the subject was, was dumbstruck in panic. After a few seconds I asked a question to which he could respond. Furious, Serge at the end of the session told me loudly "Jack I shall get your skin for this!", which he did not do of course.

The "competitive-friendly" atmosphere of the ETA meetings certainly contributed to the remarkable contributions of European groups to the development of the molecular biology of the thyroid gland. With the exception of NIS, all the major thyroid specific genes and the first thyroid oncogene RET-ATC were cloned in Europe!! The creation of the best experimental tools were announced at the ETA: FRTL, PCCL3 , CHO-TSHR cell lines, transgenics, etc. The lectures by Vassart and Santoro on the cloning of the TSH receptors and RET-PTC and by Williams on Chernobyl are among my best scientific souvenirs.

Presently the majority of European postdocs go to the Europeans labs? –Quite a few of the researchers here are our former fellows! While US fundamental researchers attended more and more ETA meetings, European clinicians continued to attend the ATA, to hear about guidelines!! The European Thyroid Journal now belongs to the thyroid scenario.

I hope the ETA will keep the same spirit and quality in the future !

1)European Thyroid Association (1967-2017) A. De Knecht-Van Eekelen, J. Orgiazzi, P. Smyth, W. Wiersinga . ETA 2017