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Interviewed by Alan Frazer

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AF: Hello, I’m Alan Frazer, the secretary of the American College of Neuropsychopharmacology. It is December 9, 2008. We’re in Scottsdae, Arizona, at the annual meeting of the ACNP having a panel discussion with some of our most eminent members, our foreign corresponding fellows, to discuss the impact the ACNP may have had both on their careers as well as on international aspects of the field of Neuropsychopharmacology. So, let me start by asking the panelists to identify themselves and perhaps state the year they joined the ACNP.

TR: Trevor Robbins, 1994.

SL: Salomon Langer, 1984.

AC: Arvid Carlsson, 1975.

RB: I’m Bob Belmaker, or Haim Belmaker. I was elected to become a member in 1990.

JZ: I’m Joseph Zohar, I joined the ACNP in 2006.

AF: Would you like to say what countries you represent?

TR: I’m from Cambridge University, UK

SL: I’m originally from Argentina, but I live in Tel Aviv, Israel.

AC: University Gothenburg, Sweden.

RB: I was born in the United States and have worked in Israel since 1974.

JZ: I was born in Israel, and live still there.

AF: Good. Well, thank you all for coming. I hope this will be a very productive session. I was wondering if you might give us some insight into the impact that the ACNP has had on the development of this field we call Neuropsychopharmacology from the perspective of your countries.

AC: Thank you. I perhaps should say that CINP started earlier than ACNP because they were European developments that started the new field. But then through the years ACNP meetings and activities have been superb and I must confess, a little bit above what CINP has been doing. I think we have to admit that the US has been doing better over the years than Europe has.

AF: Anybody else want to comment about that? Sol?

SL: Well, I would like to say, that when I started attending the ACNP meetings in the early 1980s I was working in Paris where I spent 23 years with the pharmaceutical industry. During those years I was looking forward to the opportunity every year to escape a winter in Europe for at least a week to come to the annual ACNP meeting. But, most of all it has been the quality of the science and the opportunity for interaction with the most distinguished and active neuroscientists both at the pre-clinical and at the clinical level that I found attractive in these meetings. .

AF: Trevor?

TR: I’ve always liked meetings where there is a mixture of basic and clinical science with participation of people from the drug companies. Obviously, the pharmaceutical industry is synthesizing drugs and the effects of these drugs are of great interest to us. I have been involved with the British Association of Psychopharmacology, which was formed in the early 1970s and it’s only been quite recently that I’ve realized that actually its founding was stimulated by the ACNP that was founded in 1961. I regularly come to the ACNP meetings because for me, it’s the best meeting in terms of quality of science and in particular because it has this unique overlap of academia and industry

AF: Bob?

RB: I think the impact of the ACNP on science in Israel could perhaps be measured by how popular I became when I became a foreign corresponding member of the College, and I could invite once a year a person to attend the annual meeting of the College. The number of people contacting me and asking me to sponsor them to come to the ACNP increased exponentially from 1990. Today it is tens of people who are asking me years in advance, and I think that reflects the quality of these meetings. The ACNP is a model for us. Of course there’s also another side of it; some of those who come from Israel to the ACNP meeting feel that there’s a lack of clinical take-home message. The ACNP is clearly the place where people present new science and not so much the place where the new science gets communicated to clinicians. So, I have experienced sponsoring someone to come and then having him tell me that he was disappointed and preferred the CINP for getting a clinical take-home message.

JZ: I, actually was, one of the individuals coming with Haim to the annual meetings and still thanking him for inviting me before I became a foreign corresponding member. For me, it was a very unique experience when I attended these meetings for the first time. The form of the meeting, the science and the interactions at these meetings are unique and very appealing. So, I try to come to as many meetings as I can. The ACNP was one of the models that we were looking into in order to shape the future of the ECNP.

AF: Good.

SL: I could perhaps add to this as one of the first presidents of ECNP that we openly copied many things ACNP did. This was very obvious and we were proud of it.

AF: Good. So it has had that type of impact in Europe. Although CINP came first, the ACNP became the model that you tried to emulate when you were developing the European College.

SL: Absolutely. The ECNP started in the late 1980s.

AF: Just for my own perspective: Was the ACNP asked to help? Was it interacting with you in the process?

SL: Well, we had an arrangement at that time whereby ECNP had one session at the annual ACNP meetings and the ACNP had one session at the ECNP meetings every year. I don’t know whether this arrangement has survived, but it lasted for quite a few years.

AF: And that was useful early on. This arrangement is not going on for the last I think three or four years, because of finances. But I think there is collaboration between the two colleges and actually we will be meeting tomorrow about this. We would like to make sure that the collaboration between the major organizations, ACNP, CINP, ECNP, is going to continue. I think that should be very fruitful since we are dealing with the same issues in different parts of the world

AF: Yes. This might be a more difficult question: Can either of you or all of you think of any particular scientific advance that was mentioned at the ACNP meeting that would have caused you to have gone back and carried out, perhaps a significant experiment or went back to your countries and said it looks as though America is moving in this specific direction.

SL: I can think of an example. In the, late 1970s many of the sessions were dealing with high affinity labeling of receptors and receptors sub-types. It occurred to us, while attending the meeting that the neuron transporter had many of the properties of receptors and perhaps could be labeled by the inhibitors available if they were created in high specific activities.

RB: I can remember two examples: one is rather straight forward and the other more circuitous. The straight forward one was the use of ‘knock-outs’ in neuroscience. I also made my first contacts for collaboration to get knock-out mice at an ACNP meeting. The more circuitous one was about the use of valproate in bipolar disorder. I first heard about it at a symposium here and later our group did clinical studies with the substance. But the truth is it had actually been used in small studies and reported on previously in Europe, which were not mentioned at the ACNP Symposium. It is typical, that something becomes legitimate once it’s reported at the annual meeting of the ACNP, although it might actually have been studied previously elsewhere.

AF: Well, that’s going on even today in the electronic age because on line information from most journals does not go back to papers published before 1996. We sometimes have to remind our students that there was a literature prior to 1996 because they don’t go to the library anymore. I have to remind them that serotonin was known prior to 1996 for example.

I think one of the hallmarks of the ACNP historically has been not only the science that gets presented in the sessions, but the interaction with people outside the sessions which many people find the most productive. In fact, it’s a problem for us now as we get larger to keep the informality. Sol and Arvid probably remember more than I, what went on at the Caribe Hilton when there was plenty of time. I wonder if somebody, perhaps you, Arvid, could tell us some of your fonder memories about interacting outside of the formal sessions with people. .

AC: Well, there are many people that I have met but I cannot point to anything specific. But that’s certainly one of the most charming aspect of these annual meetings I think.

SL: Yes, indeed. The discussions at the beach were usually very relaxed and very spontaneous. In many cases there was not only exchange of valuable information but also “criticism” that could not have taken place in a formal session.

AC: Scientific gossip, which I think, is very important.

JZ: One unique feature of the ACNP meetings for me was that I got some feedback outside in the corridor and near the beach that helped me a lot in my research.

TR: Invaluable blend of scientific and social interactions.

AF: Do you have any particularly fond memories of the ACNP that you could share with us?

SL: Well, I used to look forward to meeting people at ACNP; to get Arvid’s uninhibited criticism. I was really looking forward.

AF: The two of you had to fly thousands of miles that you get that criticism. Perhaps it was better in the winter to come here than it was to go up to Sweden.

AC: Sorry….

SL: It was appreciated.

AC: Thank you.

AF: Is there any particular colleague that you have become friendly with professionally or socially, as a consequence of attending the annual meeting? Trevor, is there anybody?

TR: Well, there is a whole set of American colleagues, like George Koob.

AF: Do you think meeting people is an important aspect of these meetings?

TR: I think it’s important for British neuropsychopharmacologists to interact with American and European neuropsychopharmacologists. You have to interact all the time. My favorite memory about ACNP meetings is from the late 1980s. It was the first ACNP meeting I attended. Everett Ellinwood invited me to be one of the discussants of an evening panel on computerized neuropsychological tests. Those tests were barely out there at the time and he got together three or four of us to discuss them and that was quite amazing. I was really impressed to be invited by him because I was such an admirer of his work on amphetamine and amphetamine intoxication. I had been involved in research with amphetamine myself.

JZ: I think the informality at ACNP meetings is unique. There are no ties, people move around in shorts. This makes it easier for me to go and talk to people.

RB: I think the yearly elections in the ACNP are impressive. The leadership changes year to year and it doesn’t seem to be any clique that controls the organization. The committees all function so well. Although ACNP is an establishment, a conservative organization, it still speaks up for radical small minorities. It is also very admirable that the business meetings are so well attended, and active, compared to the business meetings of some other organizations.

TR: Don’t you feel a bit guilty sometimes Robert that you don’t need to participate in endless committee meetings, that you can enjoy what ACNP has to offer without having to do any of the hard work.

AF: So you’re suggesting that foreign corresponding fellows should become committee members?

TR: No, I’m not suggesting that!

AF: Now, look into your crystal balls and tell us how you think in the next ten years, or fifteen years you think our field is going to develop. Trevor, do you want to start with this?

TR: Well, we should expect focusing on cognition in terms of pharmacological treatment of schizophrenia, Alzheimer’s disease, and other conditions. Clearly, there’s a lot of interest in the cognitive area; many companies find ingenious ways of producing new compounds targeting cognition. Some of these compounds are going to be tested in the near future and we’re going to learn a lot from the findings. I suspect we will be quite disappointed in some of the results, but I also suspect that there will be big advances in that area of research.

AF: Arvid, Sol, you’ve both been involved in drug development for many years and I’m curious how you think about the future?

AC: Let me just say first of all, that looking back, the development we’ve had through the past decades have been revolutionary and there is no reason to believe that it’s not going to continue in the same way in the future. We will have surprises, dramatic developments, but what is going to happen, I cannot tell.

AF: Sol, what do you think what’s going to happen?

SL: I think there is a concerted effort to deal with non-responders in depression. I think the pharmaceutical industry and even the biotechnology companies are aware of unmet medical needs, and are producing molecules that would address this issue. In schizophrenia compliance remains a problem. Perhaps, new approaches may get around better therapeutic agents for negative symptoms in schizophrenia.

RB: Well, the body of knowledge will certainly increase; we will know more and more about the most complex organ in the universe. Whether we will have new treatments, I agree with Arvid, that we can’t predict. I think we have to deal with things as they are without over promising. We cannot promise genes for mental illness in ‘x’ time. We cannot promise new treatments in ‘x’ time. We want to be optimistic but we should not promise that we can not deliver.

JZ: I think we will look at circuits and more microcircuits, which might lead us to better understanding about the nature of mental disease. I think that we will realize that we need to tailor treatment to the specific needs of the patient based on genetic infrastructure and specific brain circuitries, and so on.

TR: Perhaps we will need to combine psychological approaches with the psychopharmacological.

AC: Can I perhaps add one thing? I wouldn’t be surprised if we would see in the future an entirely new diagnostic system in psychiatry, one that is based on knowledge about circuitries, on the immense new knowledge based on imaging and other fabulous techniques that developed in the past decades. One could come up with an entirely new diagnostic system, I think. We already have seen that the drugs don’t care about the boundaries between one diagnosis and the other. So my prediction is that the new knowledge will eradicate a lot of the current diagnoses and that there will be a real paradigm shift in terms of diagnostics.

AF: Good. Any issue that you would like to talk about?

TR: Well, just rather humorously I never had as many problems with the airways as flying to a meeting in San Juan. Getting from London to San Juan is quite a hassle. I tried every conceivable way, from flying from London to Madrid and so on. So the very first time that I went to ACNP I missed my connection to San Juan. The next flight went two days later. So I took a flight from Madrid to Lima, Peru, stopping at the Dominican Republic and getting on American Airlines back to San Juan. I arrived only 12 hours late. At another time there was snow on the east coast. I also had hassles with immigration. I’ve had more adventures coming to the ACNP than to any other meeting.

AF: But it’s been worth.

TR: It’s been worth. I still come back.

AF: Any other concluding remarks? If not, I really want to thank the panelists for participating and devoting your time to this videotaping. Thank you very much.