

25th Anniversary of the Founding of the World Muscle Society (1995-2020). The Contribution of Prof. Giovanni Nigro (1931-2017)

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For the 25th Anniversary of the World Muscle Society (WMS), I would like to commemorate Giovanni Nigro's contribution to the founding and prosperity of this organization, which he served as treasurer for 12 years after its foundation.

The conception and birth of the WMS occurred very quickly in over the course of a five-month period marked by two moments: a meeting in Bologna on 6 March 1995 by Victor Dubowitz, Giovanni, and myself, which was followed by a memorable celebration dinner, and the meeting of the organization's 15 founding members in London on 4 June 1995, which was followed by an equally memorable dinner. From the beginning, we instinctively adopted two attitudes (excitement and enjoyment) in our activities. Then, in 2001, Victor dubbed us the Triple E Society (Education, Enjoyment, and Excitement) to reflect the three important themes of WMS congresses ¹.

In early February 1995, Victor and I began to reflect on the opportunity to create a new scientific society specifically dedicated to muscle diseases. We gave this idea the provisional name of "International Muscle Society".

Our reasons were as follows:

1. A specific society for muscle disorders did not exist, which was a bit surprising given the widespread interest and multidisciplinary nature of the field.
2. There was indeed a subdivision of the World Federation of Neurology related to neuromuscular disorders. However, it organized international congresses only every four years, which is too long to keep up with progress in the field. Above all, they lacked multidisciplinary breadth and focused mainly on neurological issues.
3. The workshops of the European Neuromuscular Center (ENMC) represented a frequent meeting point, but by its nature, it was confined to a single disease and limited to a small group of experts.
4. Two examples of what we had in mind, even if they had a regional basis, were i) the Mediterranean Society of Myology (MSM) that Giovanni Nigro established in 1993 in Ischia, which brought together members from 22 countries, especially in the Mediterranean region, and which organized biennial meetings in Naples that attracted a good international participation, and ii) Georges Serratrice, who organized similar meetings in Marseilles at approximately two-year intervals. Nigro and Serratrice collaborated in 1995 for a combined meeting in Marseille.

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5. By 1995, the journal *Neuromuscular Disorders* (NMD), which was founded in 1991, was well established as a high-quality journal and the recognized leader in the field, but it suffered from reduced impact due to poor circulation.

We therefore decided to hear Giovanni Nigro's opinion. On February 20, I called Giovanni, who was enthusiastic about the idea of the new society, and he declared himself available for a meeting. The meeting took place on the afternoon of Monday, 6 March 1995, in my office at the Rizzoli Orthopedic Institute in Bologna. Giovanni was quite enthusiastic about the concepts expressed above, and he gave us some useful hints, thoughts, and ideas in this context, including the concept of a "world" society rather than an "international" one. As he pointed out, any meeting that involves more than one or two countries is in fact international. We immediately liked the change, and the society has been called the World Muscle Society – WMS ever since. Our first priority was to get a core executive committee going to organize the society's basic charter. Giovanni suggested the three of us evaluate the MSM's charter as a template. We then decided that the next important step was to call a meeting of the new society's founding members, who would be internationally representative of the neuromuscular field's multidisciplinary nature and geographic spread. We drew up a tentative list of 15 eminent individuals worldwide, along with five reserves in case some of our initial choices had difficulty attending. Victor offered to host a meeting of the founding members in London, and we set the date for Sunday, 4 June 1995.

Finally, Victor came up with the idea of making NMD our official journal and Giovanni agreed. Giovanni explained that *Acta Cardiomyologica*, of which he was the Editor, was not constant in the publication of the issues that often concerned the proceedings of the congresses he organized. So, he felt it was more appropriate for NMD to be the Society's official journal.

As usual, in the best Bolognese tradition, which Victor had been able to appreciate for several years, we ended the day by going to dinner at a famous restaurant to celebrate the conception of the new society and toast its health and prosperity. Both of my guests enjoyed the typical Bolognese specialties and the sparkling Lambrusco wine. Of course, we asked the waiter to photograph us after the memorable day (Fig. 1).

Communications between us at the time took place by fax, so, of course, things proceeded as fax as possible (AFAP). A list of 70 potential foundation members was prepared, and all but two responded positively to the need for the new society. In addition, 15 agreed to attend the meeting in London.

The foundation meeting was held at the Ciba Foundation, 41 Portland Place, London W1, on Sunday, 4 June



Figure 1. Victor Dubowitz, Giovanni Nigro and Luciano Merlini at celebratory dinner after conception of the World Muscle Society in Bologna, on Monday, 6 June 1995.

1995, from 9:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The agenda was as follows:

1. Formation of new society / founding members;
2. Charter (draft to be tabled at meeting);
3. Proposed structure of:
 - Executive committee;
 - Advisory committee.
4. Election of executive committee;
5. The society's official journal;
6. The society's first congress;
7. Other business.

The founding members in attendance were Corrado Angelini (Italy), Victor Dubowitz (United Kingdom), Laszlo Dux (Hungary), Lars Edstrom (Sweden), Robert Griggs (United States), Hyam Isaacs (South Africa), Jean-Claude Kaplan (France), Luciano Merlini (Italy), Giovanni Nigro (Italy), Eijiro Ozawa (Japan), Georges Serratrice (France), Hideo Sugita (Japan), Michael Swash (United Kingdom), Fernando Tomé (France), and Gerta Vrbova (United Kingdom) (Fig. 2).

Everything happened in the best and most productive way. The name of the society, World Muscle Society (WMS), was approved, as was its charter, which included the following as its main aim: "To provide a multidisciplinary scientific forum to advance and disseminate knowledge in the neuromuscular field for the benefit of patients".

An executive board was then elected. It consisted of a president (Dubowitz), a secretary (Merlini), a treasurer (Nigro), and eight members: Kiichi Arahata (Japan), Laszlo Dux (Hungary), Robert Griggs (United States), Eric Hoffman (United States), Francesco Muntoni (United Kingdom), Georges Serratrice (France), Fernando Tomé (France), and Thomas Voit (Germany).

The executive board agreed to adopt NMD as the official journal of the WMS. In addition, it elected an inter-



Figure 2. Foundation meeting of the World Muscle Society, held at the Ciba Foundation in London, on Sunday, 4 June 1995. From left back row Corrado Angelini, Laszlo Dux, Gerta Vrbova, Robert Griggs, Michael Swash, Georges Serratrice, Giovanni Nigro, Jean-Claude Kaplan, Eijiro Ozawa, Luciano Merlini; front row Hyam Isaacs, Lars Edstrom, Hideo Sugita, Fernando Tomé, Victor Dubowitz.

national advisory board comprising 68 clinicians and scientists from various specialties and parts of the world who had expressed interest in forming the society. Finally, the executive board approved Dubowitz's proposal to organize the first WMS congress in London in September 1996.

Thus, WMS was born. It was celebrated the same evening during a dinner offered by Victor (Fig. 3). In the editorial that Victor wrote for NMD in 2005 to celebrate the WMS's 10th anniversary, he included a description of that memorable dinner, which I share below¹:

"We then set off for a celebratory dinner at Chez Gerard, a French restaurant nearby in Charlotte Street. It was

reassuring that our French colleagues were reasonably happy with the quality of food as well as the wine. One of our foundation members who had a passion for whiskey and a relative aversion for wine, was able to achieve level pegging with the wine drinkers on a glass for glass basis, and considerably enhanced our bill for the evening".

Since then, the WMS has thrived by organizing annual conferences in various parts of the world, thus contributing to the advancement and dissemination of knowledge in the neuromuscular field for the benefit of patients.

References

- ¹ Dubowitz V. A short history of the World Muscle Society. Neuromuscul Disord 2005;15:642-7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nmd.2005.07.003>



Figure 3. Michael Swash and Giovanni Nigro at celebratory dinner after foundation of the World Muscle Society in London, on Monday, 6 June 1995.