

OMCOS 12

Toronto
2003

OMCOS 12, Canada, July 6-10, 2003.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...

Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

When I attended the OMCOS in Versailles in 1999 I met Jean-Pierre Genet, one of the conference Chairs, outside the conference centre and we agreed to have lunch that day. During the course of a typical French lunch he convinced me that hosting an OMCOS was a great idea and that Toronto would be a very desirable location for this meeting. I was quite excited by the prospect but really not very well prepared to make a presentation. Fortunately in those days the committee was quite informal and they accepted my last minute participation and selected me to be Chair of OMCOS 12.

The meeting in Versailles and the one that followed in Taipei were spectacular in terms of location, scientific content and so the standard was set at a very high level. Toronto has neither the grandeur of Versailles nor the exotic nature of a trip to the Far East so we decided to keep it relatively simple and use facilities at the university, much as had been done when I attended in Goettingen in 1997. Our costs would be contained which was important given the limited fundraising

possible from government sources in Canada. We were fortunate that our department, Dean and Provost all were supportive as was the pharmaceutical industry in Canada and around the world.

Upon returning to Toronto I made two decisions that ultimately contributed as much to the success of the meeting as any I would make. I invited my former colleague, then Director at Merck Frosst, Rick Friesen to be my co-chair of the conference. Rick is perhaps the most organized and responsible person I know so having him on board kept us on track in the months leading up to the meeting. Secondly we conscripted Sue McClelland, from our department, to oversee all aspects of the local organization, registration and venue. As things were to unfold, having these two as part of the team proved to be essential.

We selected the venue based on an estimated attendance of 600-1000 participants, not unreasonable given the past success of this meeting and the interest by industrial and academic chemists. We booked Convocation Hall, capacity 1500 and started planning our list of speakers and began to concern ourselves with the Conference Banquet

location and events surrounding the meeting. Our line-up of speakers was outstanding and things moved along quite smoothly during all the stages late into 2002 and early 2003. However events from outside our borders were about to change the planning of the meeting leading to us eventually considering moving the meeting or cancelling it altogether.

Late in 2002 the first reported cases of a dangerous respiratory disease appeared, a contagion ultimately to be known as SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome). The disease rapidly spread from Asia (China, Singapore, Vietnam, Hong Kong) to the west and to Canada in particular thanks to the miracle of modern airline travel. Toronto proved to be one of several cities that became a "hot spot" and ultimately SARS took its toll on the citizens and economy of the city. By April many conferences had been cancelled and scenes of masked men and women in our airports appeared on the CBC National News. Every sneeze in a movie theatre or cough in a classroom became a cause for concern. Thousands of people were placed in quarantine and concern about the capacity of our medical system to handle the load were spoken.

Unfortunately for us, the peak of the infection coincided with the deadline we had set for early registration. Our earliest registrants

began to cancel and new registrations ground to a halt. Companies forbid their employees from attending and some countries strongly encouraged their citizens from travelling to Toronto. To say we were in a panic mode was an understatement. We extended the deadline hoping the fear would subside and the WHO would decide Toronto was "inhabitable" again but just as we were about to pass the magic "20 days with no new cases" period the WHO extended the recommendation not to travel to Toronto and we were sunk. We reached a near sub-critical number of registrations but stayed just above and after much hand-wringing decided to proceed. Discussions were held on moving the conference but that was not viewed as possible. One consequence was that with about one quarter of our expected number of participants, all our original plans were out the window and we had to essentially organize a second meeting, this one about the size of a Gordon Research Conference. We were very fortunate that virtually all our speakers agreed to come and give their lectures though it resulted in many amusing stories of how they got their governments, companies and institutions to agree! At least one promised to stay in his office in quarantine after the meeting. It is worth stating that the total number of deaths in Toronto from SARS was 43! It was tough to reconcile what we saw on an everyday basis and the impression given to the outside world.

In the end the meeting was a scientific if not financial success. We had warned speakers we were struggling and all agreed that they would lecture even if they had to pay the bulk of their expenses. Fortunately we managed to stick to our original commitments thanks to many companies having supported the meeting. The poster session was now manageable and many young attendees had their posters selected for short talks. The meeting did feel like a Gordon Conference in many ways and ultimately it was good fun and we were excused any shortcoming of the meeting since we could blame the problems on SARS rather than our oversights. The lectures were at the usual standard and there were plenty of jokes of the black humour variety if a speaker sneezed or a cough was heard in the audience. Perhaps we all felt like we had survivor syndrome? One highlight was the conference banquet where I was

presented with a huge birthday card signed by many of the participants. Kyoko Nozaki was selected for the OMCOS prize and our speakers came from Asia, Europe and North America.

My deepest thanks to all those who took the chance and came to Toronto and to Rick Friesen and Sue McClelland who kept me on an even keel as things unraveled. Thanks also to William Tam who put together the Pure and Applied Chemistry volume from the lectures at the meeting.

Sometimes, during a quiet moment, I have wondered if I should bid to hold the meeting here in the future knowing that lightning could not possibly strike twice and that many more people would like to see Toronto than had the chance to do so back in 2003.

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