The Aspen Retinal Detachment Society Celebrates 40th Anniversary of Annual Meeting

BY DONALD J. D’AMICO, MD; TIMOTHY G. MURRAY, MD, MBA, FACS; AND KAREN BARANICK

In March 2012, the Aspen Retinal Detachment Society (ARDS) celebrated the 40th anniversary of its annual meeting in Snowmass, CO. Founded in 1973 by William O. Edward, MD, and Ottiwell Wood Jones III, MD, the ARDS was launched to advance the field of retinal surgery by bringing together a global group of ophthalmologic leaders to actively share knowledge and exchange ideas. The ARDS became legendary for its in-depth coverage of subjects, lively discussion periods, and outstanding faculty.

AN IDEA CONCEIVED

Drs. Edward and Jones conceived the idea of the ARDS in 1969 following their attendance at a large ophthalmology meeting. The 2 physicians and their wives, Mary Lou Edward and Elita Jones, were having dinner at Trader Vic’s in San Francisco and were sharing their frustration. According to Dr. Edward, “The pattern of the time was to hold big meetings, in big cities, in big hotels, in big rooms, with poor ventilation, and no chance for access to the outdoors.” For Drs. Edward and Jones, the meeting in San Francisco was where the proverbial straw broke the camel’s back.

Over their meal, they put forth the concept of holding a more intimate retina-based meeting with longer lectures followed by active discussion periods and plenty of time for questions at the end of each presentation. In addition, they settled on what would become the cornerstone of the ARDS meeting: it should be held in the spectacular location of Aspen/Snowmass specifically so that people could be involved in active winter sports during the day and then meet for intellectual discussion in the afternoon.

Drs. Edward and Jones ran their idea past luminaries in the field who had a great influence on their lives, including David O. Jesberg, MD, who trained both physicians at the University California, San Francisco. Ariah Schwartz, MD, William F. Hoyt, MD, and Robert J. Brockhurst, MD, were critical figures who provided them with valuable ideas and information. Dr. Brockhurst served as a speaker at the inaugural meeting; and for 25 years, from 1973 to 1998, Dr. Hoyt, Mary Lou and Bill Edward.
a neuroretinologist, presented a series of unique clinical vignettes to educate the ARDS members. These recognized leaders in ophthalmology were in full agreement that there was a need for a small, integrated society that annually brought its members together to explore the most significant advances in medical and surgical retina, and, thus, the first meeting of the ARDS was held in 1973.

**THE FOUNDING MEMBERS**

Recognition for any society must fundamentally focus on its founding members. This is no truer than for the ARDS, which owes its beginning, and its 40 year span, to the vision and dedication of these valued colleagues. Critical to the success of the meeting were the involvement of Victor T. Curtin, MD, one of the “founding 5” physicians of the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute, and Mary Lou Lewis, MD, one of the first women in retina recognized on a national and international level. Functioning as the hub of an informal Organizing Committee, Drs. Curtin and Lewis played a significant role in deciding the scientific program and selecting the best speakers, laying the foundation on which the reputation of the ARDS was built.

**NEW GENERATION OF LEadersHIP**

Approximately 12 years ago, the responsibilities of the Organizing Committee began informally transferring to Donald J. D’Amico, MD, then at Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, and Timothy G. Murray, MD, MBA, FACS, then at Bascom Palmer Eye Institute. In 2005, Drs. D’Amico and Murray brought Karen Baranick and her company, Medical Conference Planners International, on board to help them organize the yearly meeting. Reflecting on the commitment of the original Organizing Committee, Ms. Baranick points out, “If not for the dedication of a handful of people, the ARDS could have easily fallen to the wayside; instead it remains the vibrant meeting envisioned by the founders.”

During this decade of leadership, Drs. D’Amico and Murray have continued the focus on speaker excellence and audience participation for which the ARDS is celebrated. Interactive technologies for audience participation were deployed during this period to capture the members’ responses. In recent years, younger vitreoretinal surgeons have scribed the yearly meeting, offering a published synopsis of the presentations and an integration of the audience discussion and formal response.

Understanding the importance of transition over stagnation, the ARDS has moved from a small meeting of several early innovators in retinal disease to a more vigorous range of 125 allowing greater member participation. Throughout this transition, however, the ARDS has remained true to its core principles of excellent teaching, innovative and in-depth presentations, and intense dialogue between the speakers and the members. “The hallmark of the ARDS over the last decade has been to evolve membership so as to include both new members and viewpoints but to include a continued focus on the integrative format of the society,” said Dr. Murray.

**RENOuNED SPEAKERS AND STIMULATING DISCOURSE**

The ARDS is an association of many of the finest retinal detachment specialists in the world, and it is
regarded as one of the premier invitations to be asked to be a speaker at the meeting. Members of the ARDS audience are young physicians as well as leaders in the field who are as respected and distinguished as the lecturers on the stage. This high level of equality between speaker and audience creates an incredible dynamic that is abundantly on display during the post-lecture discussions for which the ARDS is legendary.

The question-and-answer periods that follow a descriptive lecture on topics such as new diagnostic technologies, tumors in the eye, pediatric retinal diseases, or important socioeconomic or political themes are extremely energetic with the occasional four-letter word thrown, but with debate and good active interchange—never argument—being the modus operandi. “At the meeting, people are confronted over their opinion and have to defend their position,” said Dr. Jones. “That is the reason for the success of the ARDS.”

The essence of the society, which has remained true over its 40-year-span, is, as Dr. D’Amico said, “the best peers, and the best peers in a peer-to-peer format, peppered with enough luminaries to keep us all on our toes.”

**SEMINAL TALKS**

Seminal talks at the ARDS spotlight the excellence of the speakers and recognize the innovative and novel presentations that often are first presented at the meeting. As the ARDS began before vitrectomy surgery existed, virtually every major advance was presented at the ARDS as it was unfolding.

The past 40 years have seen the development of novel surgical strategies for vitreoretinal surgery, the passage from scleral buckling to primary pars plana vitrectomy, the changing role of macular imaging from contact lens biomicroscopy to spectral domain ocular coherence tomography, and the paradigm shifts in treating neovascular age-related macular degeneration from observation of this blinding disease to laser ablation to pharmacologic intervention with anti-VEGF intravitreal injections, all of which have been presented, analyzed, discussed, and often uniquely integrated into clinical practices across the world through the forums of the ARDS. Seminal talks at the meeting have included “Idiopathic Bilateral Recurrent Branch Retinal Arterial Occlusion: A Clinical Syndrome” by J. Donald M. Gass, MD, and “Water Movement by Pigment Epithelium” presented by Alan C. Bird, MD.
The ARDS has maintained and will continue the revolutionary meeting practices that Drs. Edward and Jones originally set in place.

NAMED LECTURES

Taylor Smith Lecture. The ARDS also includes 2 named lectures. The first lecture was named in honor of Taylor Smith, MD, one of the great heroes of the retina world who was Charles L. Schepens, MD’s, first fellow in the 1950s. A physician who has made an important contribution in the clinical or the basic science of vitreoretinal diseases, diagnosis, or care is invited to present the Taylor Smith Lecture. Thomas M. Aaberg, Sr., MD, presented the first annual lecture in 1983, “Retinal Detachment in Proliferative Diabetic Retinopathy.” The 30th Annual Taylor Smith Lecture was delivered this year by J. Brooks Crawford, MD, whose talk was entitled, “Is Eye Pathology Still Relevant for the Clinical Ophthalmologist?”

The roster of physicians who have presented the Taylor Smith Lecture consists of the most premier retina specialists in the world. Past lecturers include Alan C. Bird, MD; J. Donald M. Gass, MD; Robert J. Brockhurst, MD; George W. Blankenship, MD; Carmen C. Puliafito, MD; and David W. Parke II, MD.

Founders Lecture. With the passing of ARDS founder Dr. Edward on January 1, 2012, the William O. Edward Founders Lecture was established to recognize Dr. Edward’s contribution, commitment, and dedication to the ARDS. Steve Charles, MD, presented the first William O. Edward Founders Lecture at this year’s 40th Anniversary Meeting. In 2013, the lecture’s name will transition to “The William O. Edward and Ottiwell W. Jones Founders Lecture” to acknowledge the symbiotic partnership of the 2 men in the formation of the ARDS. In 2014 and going forward, the lecture’s name will be condensed to “The Founders Lecture.”

MEETING VENUE

No mention of the ARDS could exclude the uniqueness of its venue. Traditionally, the first week in March at Snowmass Village has belonged to and will continue to belong to the Aspen Retinal Detachment Society. At the meeting’s beginning in 1973, the venue was the Wildwood Inn located in Snowmass. In 1986 the ARDS moved to the Snowmass Conference Center, and in 2011, the meeting moved to the beautiful Viceroy Snowmass Hotel.

It is this uniquely beautiful backdrop that frames a meeting where members and their families grow together year after year on a beautiful mountain while dedi- cating energy and focus to enhancing clinical care for patients both in the United States and around the world.

LOOKING FORWARD

The advancement of the ARDS is due in large part to the large role industry has played. Support from more than 15 companies, and the presence of more than 50 corporate representatives annually, has helped to ensure the society is positioned at the forefront of science. The ARDS and its industry partners have always maintained an excellent relationship.

In 2011, the ARDS stepped into the social media arena with the introduction of a Facebook page and ARDS app for mobile devices. The ARDS also commemorated its 40th anniversary with a book, An Oral History of the Aspen Retinal Detachment Society: 1973-2012.

The last 4 decades have seen the development of vitreoretinal surgery, the implementation of retinal pharmacotherapy, and the improvement of quality of life and vision for millions of individuals with life-threatening and vision-compromising diseases. The next 40 years are likely to be no less spectacular in the vitreoretinal field. Throughout these advances, the ARDS has maintained and will continue the revolutionary meeting practices that Drs. Edward and Jones originally set in place: world-class faculty, collegiality of the society, depth of presentations, and the integration of discussion that has been critical to the success of the meeting. It is the passion and focus of the ARDS membership that will continue to drive the excellence of this meeting.

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