

Progress toward the Creation of an Independent UEMS Section of Clinical Microbiology

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Background

In a previous article (ESCMID News 2007; issue 2: 14-17) it was explained why Clinical Microbiology had not achieved the status of an independent specialist section within the framework of the UEMS. The history of this situation dates back to the middle of the past century, when only a few European countries decided to establish an economical and political union. During that period the UEMS was founded as a professional lobby of recognized medical specialties. For each recognized specialty a UEMS Section was created and delegates were selected by the specialist national medical associations to convene within each specific monospecialist section. These sections form the backbone of the UEMS. At that time laboratory medicine had not yet reached the degree of (sub)specialization, as it now has. In the past fifty years, however, Microbiology has developed into an influential and respected medical specialty in many countries within and outside of Europe. Partly due to the impressive expansion of the European Union, many Member States now recognize Clinical Microbiology as a full specialty, and the situation has therefore changed drastically.

Presently, Microbiology is represented as an informal subspecialty in the Commission of Microbiology under the umbrella of the UEMS Section of Medical Biopathology. For many years there has been discussion on this positioning. In addition active members of the Commission of Microbiology have made progress in developing a consensus training programme and criteria for a specialist UEMS fellowship. Nevertheless, the wish to become an independent section with its own identity is growing, augmented by pressure exerted by the individual national and international professional and scientific societies.

UEMS Council Meeting on 11-13 October 2007 in Bratislava

The request to become an independent Section of Clinical Microbiology was put on the meeting agenda of the UEMS Council meeting in Bratislava in October 2007 and the Commission of Microbiology was offered the opportunity to express its views.

These views were put forward as follows:

- When UEMS started its work in 1958, there were six member states: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

Five of these states recognized polyvalent laboratory medicine and three considered Microbiology as a distinct specialty. By consensus it was decided to bring these disciplines together into one Section of Laboratory Medicine. This name was later changed to The Section of Medical Biopathology.

- In the last half century, Microbiology has developed significantly as a clinical specialty with a training programme of four to five years in many countries around the world. The majority of the UEMS-affiliated countries, 20 of 27, recognize Microbiology as a full specialty. This is more than the required one-third of full members to petition for an independent specialty, according to UEMS rules. Therefore the Specialty should be recognized at the European level by the UEMS.
- Microbiologists not only from the older Member States, but especially those from the new ones find the present status of the specialty in the UEMS fully unacceptable.
- The title 'Medical Biopathology' is ill-fit to the Specialty and continuously gives rise to non-constructive discussions within the Section of Medical Biopathology.
- Meeting twice a year with delegates from disciplines, with which Clinical Microbiology appears to have little affinity within the framework of the Section of Medical Biopathology, is not considered an effective exercise.
- The creation of a separate section is firmly supported by all members of the Microbiology Commission and by the profession as a whole, which is represented by the European Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases. Therefore an independent Section should be created.

During this meeting of the UEMS Council, Dr. Merten, President of the Section of Medical Biopathology, objected that problems will arise for the Section of Medical Biopathology if the Commission of Microbiology decides to become independent. It may even be followed by the withdrawal of further sections such as: Clinical Chemistry, Immunology, Transfusion, Haematology and Polyvalent Laboratory Medicine. This certainly would weaken the position of Laboratory Medicine. Furthermore, a separation of Microbiology, would be harmful for those who are or have been trained in polyvalent laboratory medicine, are predominantly practicing microbiology and therefore should be considered as microbiologists.

Therefore, if the Council chose to create a new Section of Microbiology, a modus should be found to prevent severe damage to the present Section of



Country delegates during the Board and Section meeting of the UEMS Section of Medical Biopathology in Lisbon 2006

Medical Biopathology and to deal with polyvalently trained specialists.

Delegates in the UEMS Council, in particular the past Council presidents Dr. Twomey (Ireland) and Dr. Halila (Finland) felt that the request of the microbiologists is justified, under the condition that the Secretary General of the UEMS, Dr. Maillet, should, together with the Section of Medical Biopathology, advise on a plan to create a federation of laboratory-based specialties, which include the afore-mentioned disciplines and, possibly, Surgical Pathology.

Following these discussions the present UEMS Chairman, Dr. Frasc, asked the Council to postpone the intended voting procedure to recognize a Clinical Microbiology section and proposed a moratorium until the spring Council meeting in Brussels in order to allow time to prepare the federation structure. The proposal was approved with 16 in favour and three against the proposal.

On behalf of the Microbiology Commission it was stated that there should be no misunderstanding that the microbiologists consider an independent section as the only solution. However, the Commission is favourable toward cooperation with other laboratory-based specialties, especially in view of laboratory medicine developments within large scale organizations, now relevant in Europe.

Finally it was decided that Dr. Maillet, Dr. Merten as President of the Section of Medical Biopathology and I as Convener of the Microbiology Commission would come forward with a proposal to the Section of Medical Biopathology at the meeting in October in Linz for cooperation in a federative structure.

Meeting of the Board and Section of the Section of Medical Biopathology and the Commission of Microbiology on 20 October 2007 in Linz

During the autumn meeting of the Section of Medical Biopathology, a separate meeting of the Microbiology Commission took place. Once more it was stated that:

- The polyvalent approach, with a limited training period for a number of specific disciplines, is different from full training in the Clinical Microbiology specialty which consists of a four-

to five-year intensive training period.

- The discussion on the justification of recognition has been ongoing for ten years.
- The decision to create a separate Section should be taken as soon as possible so as to free up more of the Commission's resources for other issues.
- For many years the Commission of Microbiology has requested that the Section of Medical Biopathology rename itself to adequately represent the microbiologists as well.
- The German Society of Microbiology is considering a withdrawal from UEMS as they foresee no immediate resolution of the issues at hand.

These views were summarized during the subsequent plenary meeting of delegates to the Section of Medical Biopathology and made up the introduction to a plea to support the creation of a new Section of Clinical Microbiology.

Future cooperation will be welcomed by the newly created Section of Clinical Microbiology, but this obviously should serve a mutual interest. The problem of qualified microbiologists in countries that do not recognize the monospecialty and thus cannot send delegates according to UEMS rules, cannot be solved at this time, but the new Section is prepared to accept monovalent specialists with a polyvalent background and will pursue a status of equal treatment. It is suggested that the Section of Medical Biopathology also designs a structure in which monospecialists from polyvalent countries can find their place. This is an obvious common goal for both sections, which can only be achieved through cooperation.

The UEMS has offered a possible solution in the form of a federative cooperation. Such a federative structure only provides a discussion platform and is comprised of delegates from one or more sections. Final decisions concerning the functioning of one or more sections can be made by the sections only. This approach and its consequences will need further study.

Statements made by the Section and Board of Medical Biopathology

At the end of the meeting in Linz the Section of Medical Biopathology made the following con-

cluding statements:

- The Section of Medical Biopathology takes into account that its Commission of Microbiology seeks to form a Section of its own.
- Whereas the delegates of the Section believe strongly in the unity of Laboratory Medicine as a whole (i.e. Medical Biopathology, Polyvalent Medical Pathology, Laboratory Medicine, Clinical Haematology and Transfusion Medicine, Clinical Immunology, Clinical Chemistry and Clinical Microbiology), it respects the wish of its Commission of Microbiology.
- The Section believes that cooperation between the two future Sections should be within a federation and requests the UEMS Council to simultaneously create a Section of Clinical Microbiology and a Federation of Laboratory Medicine.

Conclusion

Many members of the Microbiology Commission contacted their respective national delegates from

the medical associations to the UEMS Council, in order to provide information about an independent Section of Clinical Microbiology. Many delegates supported this proposal during the UEMS Council meeting in Bratislava. Nevertheless it will be of utmost importance that contacts between members of the Microbiology Commission, their national scientific and professional societies and Council delegates are maintained until this issue is definitively settled during the Council meeting in Brussels in April 2008.

Finally, the Microbiology Commission will convene during ECCMID 2008 in Barcelona following the Council's decision in April 2008. This meeting should be considered to be a founding meeting for the new Section of Clinical Microbiology.