

Special Article

# The Early History of the American Society for Reproductive Immunology: A Personal Memoir

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Several years ago, I was asked to write about the development and early history of the American Society for Immunology and Reproduction, first by Joan Hunt, and then Judith Head, when each was president of the ASIR. Then, later, David Clark and Tom Gill, when they were presidents, officially named me as the Society Historian. Though this has been an organization that is of the utmost importance to me, and to which I devoted an enormous amount of time and effort, I have been slow to respond. But, at last, let me tell you that story of how and why we developed, and our early days, based upon my memory, notes, and letters that I have kept.

As an undifferentiated medical student at the University of Virginia, having returned to University of Virginia to go to medical school after several years on active duty in the US Navy, I tried to assess which areas of medicine I enjoyed the most, as I went through the different clerkships. In those days, we had 3 months off every summer, and each summer I obtained a fellowship and did research. I worked in the Department of Physiology, and then Microbiology. I was so intrigued by the tissue culture work and immunological studies I did in my second summer, that I continued to work on those projects throughout the next school year. I also learned that I was best suited for the specialty of Obstetrics and Gynecology, because it was the best mix of both general medicine and surgery, both being of great interest to me.

I had also fallen in love with the science of immunology and basic research, and began to wonder where my clinical and research interests could cross. While in medical school I had done some work with Dr. Quentin Myrvik on a bactericidin for *Bacillus subtilis*. After my year of internship of 36 hr on and 12 off, I started my residency in OB/GYN at the University Hospitals of Cleveland, Western Reserve University School of Medicine. Now it was possible to do some research, because I was on duty at night only every third night, and Dr. Charles Hendricks offered to support any reasonable research projects I might do. I was given some laboratory space, the equipment I needed, and allowed to conduct my first, completely independent research project. The question I asked was, "Are there any increased mechanisms of protection against infection in the pregnant human woman?" I studied the levels of that bactericidin for *Bacillus subtilis* throughout pregnancy, in both serum and amniotic fluid. I found, much to my surprise and delight, that significant levels of the bactericidin developed in pregnancy, and that the amniotic fluid contained a significant level of activity. This led to my first publication (A bactericidin for *Bacillus subtilis* in pregnancy, *J Immunol* 1962;88:494–499). I was hooked for life, and many other studies, experiments, and publications were to follow. As I progressed in my clinical and immunological paths, questions began to arise. But I could not find the answers, and there was no one I could go to who had the answers. The clinicians were intrigued by the questions, but had no idea about the answers, or how to develop research to obtain the answers. The basic immunologists I approached were completely absorbed in their own basic mechanisms research, and weren't interested in my questions. It became apparent that I had to learn immunology and research far beyond what I had been able to do in medical school and doing research alone during my residency. Immediately after completing the residency in OB/GYN, I started a 3-year postdoctoral fellowship in immunology with Professor Abram Stavitsky in the Department of Microbiology at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine. During those 3 years, I did basic immunological research and became a basic scientist, learning some of the tools I needed to pursue the questions I had been asking. Dr. Stavitsky was kind enough to allow me to do some research concerning immunology and reproduction, and was a superb source of basic immunology information at all times. I was then able to start my own laboratory and begin to try to answer some of the questions about reproduction. But the same problem I mentioned earlier continued to exist, as the years went by. There was no one else with whom I could

discuss my work. However, as time passed, I began to find other researchers in reproductive biology beginning to use immunological methodology in some of their publications, and I wrote to them, telling them of my interest in their work. Around 1975, having read a couple of articles by Stanley Gall using immunological methodology, I met with him, and asked if he would join me in an effort to develop a society of people with interests in both reproduction and immunology. He agreed that it would be a good idea, and I proceeded to write to everyone who published a paper combining those disciplines. I asked if they would be willing to help develop such an organization. Over the years, I must have sent a thousand letters. Thank God for the development of the word processor. An occasional response was positive. The usual answer, if there was one, was negative. On rare occasions, the answer was insulting; an example, "why the hell do you want to develop another organization? We've got too damn many organizations now!" I'm pleased to tell you that man never did join us, and I'm also pleased to say that some of the most effective, devoted, and dedicated members originally answered my entreaties in the negative.

However, a small cache of very interested people did start meeting, and we presented our ongoing work to each other, and critiqued and advised. Our start was small, and at first we would meet in one of our hotel rooms, at two of the major OB/GYN meetings, each year: the Society for Gynecologic Investigation (SGI), and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG). Aside from Stanley Gall and myself, the first meetings were held with the following dedicated members: Alan Beer, Sidney Shulman, Jim Scott, Rudi Ansbacher, and Richard Ablin. As our numbers grew, we started reserving a room at the ACOG meetings and were put on the schedule of events—our meetings were open to all registered attendees. I hoped to model our society after the SGI which had an excellent mix of both M.D.s and Ph.D.s in many disciplines, including OB/GYN, Pediatrics, Pathology, Internal Medicine, and basic sciences such as Physiology, Biochemistry, Pharmacology, Microbiology, and even Animal Science. We all met, with our different backgrounds and our common interest in reproduction, but we believed that, though the SGI was an excellent forum, its canvas was far too broad. We wished to narrow the focus to immunology and reproduction and invite more and more people with that focus to join us at our meetings. The ACOG allowed such people to attend that portion of the congress without paying any fee, and that was a significant help in getting people to attend who could contribute a perspective we needed, but weren't interested in the rest of the

meeting. We decided to call our organization the American Society for the Immunology of Reproduction (ASIR). Not only did I continue to write letters to all who published papers of interest to us, but our existence was being disseminated by the other early members. Thus, our meetings continued to attract people with a similar perspective and interest.

We had discussed the official formation and incorporation of the ASIR when I received a letter from Norbert Gleicher. He was trying to develop a symposium on immunology and reproduction to be held at the Mount Sinai Medical Center at New York. He said that the Department of OB/GYN at Mount Sinai, then chaired by Saul Gusberg, intended to underwrite the costs of the symposium, if he could get it developed. He hoped that we could hold our regular meeting in conjunction with this symposium, and that we would present papers at the meeting. After discussion with all of the other members, we agreed to attend and participate, with the hope that we would attract new potential members from all disciplines and other countries.

It was a successful meeting, and we agreed to meet again at Mount Sinai the next year and formalize our organization. In the interim, I wrote the first constitution, directed towards our goals of cross-pollination and collaboration of scientists from all disciplines investigating immunology and reproduction. At the 1981 meeting in New York City, we formalized the society, signed up many new members, collected dues, and elected our first slate of officers with the understanding that they would serve for the first 3 years so that we would have stability. They were:

President:	John P. Gusdon Jr
President-elect:	Stanley Gall
Vice President:	Norbert Gleicher
Secretary/Treasurer:	Sidney Shulman
Councillors:	Alan Beer
	Carmel Cohen
	Roland Patillo

The constitution was adopted, and I volunteered to host the next meeting in Winston-Salem, NC, with Bowman Gray School of Medicine of Wake Forest University as the sponsoring educational institution. I had all the secretarial help I needed. Not only did I advertise our meeting in a number of our specialty journals, but I had collected the names and addresses

of many of our comrades-in-thinking, and started a letter writing campaign, inviting all to participate in our next International Symposium on the Immunology of Reproduction. Again, the word processor deserves thanks.

In the meantime, I came up with an idea that I had never heard of previously, but which I have since tried to pass on to subsequent program chairpersons. I went to the medical school's and hospital's purchasing departments and obtained the names of every organization with which we'd spent more than \$10,000 over the past 2 years. Having devised a letter outlining our cause and needs, I asked the CEOs of each company for donations to support our endeavor. Again, thank God for the word processor. We collected enough money so that with the registration fees from the people at the doctoral level, all graduate students and fellows from laboratories of members were admitted free. Sufficient funds were obtained from one company to pay to bring Page Faulk from France as one of our guest speakers, and bring John Bowman from Manitoba, Canada; John taught us what he had learned about the prevention of Rh sensitization. One of our guest speakers, Bernard Amos, came from Duke University to close our meeting with an outstanding summary and evaluation of our efforts. After all expenses were paid, I was able to put several thousand dollars into the coffers of the ASIR. But most gratifying was the fact that we had over 350 registrants from all over the world, including the "iron curtain" countries. At least 10 people came from as far away as Australia and presented their outstanding studies on Early Pregnancy Factor (EPF), and numerous Japanese scientists presented superb papers. But Europe was not to be outclassed; every European country was represented. Three of our most stalwart contributors and dedicated members came from Canada: David Clark, Tom Wegmann, and Peeyush Lala. The cross-pollination was outstanding, collaborative efforts were started, and our membership increased significantly. It was wonderful to have so many truly superb scientists learning from each other. I felt that the organization was on solid ground and that it was time for me to get out of the way so that others could assume leadership roles.

At our business meeting in 1982, elections were again held, and the slates of officers elected, the location of our annual meeting and the program chairs were as follows:

Year	Program chair	Meeting site	Officers elected
June 1983	James Scott	Park City, UT	President: Stanley Gall President-elect: Alan Beer Vice President: James Scott Secretary/Treasurer: Sidney Shulman Councillors: Patillo, Kohorn
June 1984	Stanley Gall	Durham, NC	President: Alan Beer President-elect: James Scott Vice President: Jan Friberg Secretary/Treasurer: Sidney Shulman Councillors: Kohorn, Rote, Coulam
June 1985	Alan Beer	Ann Arbor, MI	President: James Scott President-elect: Sidney Shulman Vice President: Peeyush Lala Secretary/Treasurer: Ernie Kohorn Councillors: Coulam, Rote

Those were the early formative and tremendously exciting years. As the Society matured, it became clear that changes were necessary. The name was changed to the American Society for Reproductive Immunology, the constitution was modified, and we incorporated.

I am honored to have had an opportunity to be a part of this magnificent Society's beginnings and to have been given the opportunity to now give credit to so many others who have played significant parts in our organization and its development.