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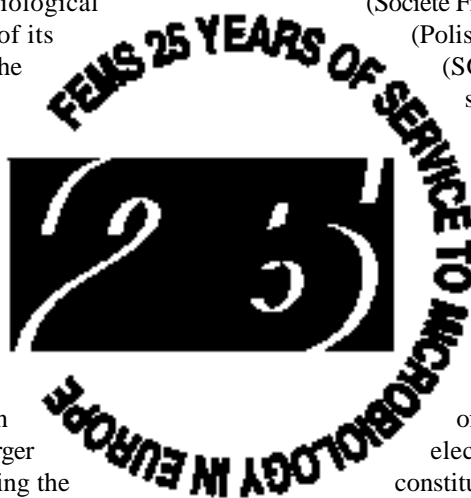
# Twenty-five years of FEMS

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The Federation of European Microbiological Societies (FEMS) has decided to celebrate its 25th anniversary this year in connection with the 4th European Nitrogen Fixation Conference in Sevilla, a scientific meeting supported by FEMS and to be held September 16 to 20. Although it may seem unnecessary to explain in a well established microbiological journal what FEMS is, I doubt that all of its readers are really well informed about the scope, the—admittedly short—history, the past and the new activities, the offers, the aims and the tools of FEMS.

**Founding history** Let us systematically begin with the foundation of FEMS. Since 1968, FEMS had a forerunner in a much smaller international consortium, the North-West European Microbiology Group, comprising societies from Britain, the Netherlands and the four Scandinavian countries. The impetus to found a much larger unrestricted European federation following the example of the European biochemists with their meanwhile well established FEBS, came from three officers of the British Society for General Microbiology (SGM), Sir David Evans, Harry Smith, and Anthony Rose, who were strongly supported by André Lwoff from the Institut Pasteur in Paris. It took three preparative meetings of representatives of Societies from different countries until FEMS was born: (i) In May 1973, members of thirteen European microbiological societies, of which nine were already firmly committed to the concept of Federation, met in Paris. (ii) The second meeting was held in London in January 1974; thirteen societies were represented, and five other

had shown an interest. A set of Statutes was drafted based on those of FEBS and circulated to all representatives. It was agreed that the office of the SGM in Reading, U.K., would also house the headquarters of the future Federation. The delegates elected an interim Executive Committee comprising A. Lwoff\* (Société Française de Microbiologie), M. Mordarski (Polish Society for Microbiology), A.H. Rose (SGM), H.P.R. Seeliger (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Hygiene und Mikrobiologie) and H. Smith (SGM). Dr. Seeliger\* served as *pro tempore* chairman, Dr. Rose as secretary. This committee had to organize and prepare the first meeting of a Council of the Federation in autumn 1974, to which all European microbiological societies (no matter what political situation prevailed in their countries) were to be invited to send an official delegate. This meeting then should elect an Executive Committee. (iii) The constitutive meeting of the delegates to become FEMS Council took place in Amsterdam, November 22, 1974. In its first part, Dr. Seeliger held the chair, and the duties of the individual officers were thoroughly discussed, especially those of the Meetings Secretary of whom the strongest international integrative function was expected. A nominating committee was formed to deliberate and produce a list of candidates for the respective offices. In the second part of the



\* See Obituaries on André Lwoff (1902–1994) in *Microbiología SEM* 10:433–434 (1994) and on Heinz P.R. Seeliger (1920–1997) in *Internatl. Microbiol.* 1:73–74 (1998)

meeting the recommendations of the nominating committee were unanimously accepted and A. Lwoff elected as President, M. Mordarski as Vice-President, H. Smith as Treasurer, A.H. Rose as Secretary General and C.J.E.A. Bulder as Meetings Secretary. The delegates at that constitutive council meeting came from the Societies of Bulgaria, Danmark, Finland, France, (West-) Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the U.K. (two societies). Now, FEMS was clearly on its way. Although the Federation historians count the 1974 meeting as the first FEMS Council meeting, the first complete FEMS Council Meeting starting with an elected Board of Officers took place November 21, 1975, in Vienna. Only lawyers would thus struggle about the exact founding date.

**25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary** Therefore, the Council decided to celebrate FEMS 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary this year, 2000. The recent presidency of César Nombela had been of decisive importance for the future fruitful developments of FEMS. Besides, Sevilla is one of the most beautiful cities in Europe. Therefore, it was more or less logical to choose the FEMS sponsored Nitrogen Fixation Conference to be held in Sevilla this year for holding the FEMS Council Meeting 2000 and to combine it with the FEMS jubilee. The celebrations will take place on Saturday, September 16 from 16:00 h to 24:00 h in the hotel Meliá Lebreros in Sevilla in the company of past and current FEMS officers, chief editors of FEMS journals, and Council members as well as members from the Spanish Society for Microbiology (SEM).

**André Lwoff medal** As part of the jubilee celebrations, FEMS has commissioned a medal in commemoration of Prof. André Lwoff, its first President (1974–1976) and initiator. The medal, which carries with it an honorarium of 1000 euros, will be presented every second year to a FEMS society member for outstanding service to microbiology in Europe. The first medal will be presented in Sevilla to Prof. Philippe Sansonetti of the Pasteur Institute who will deliver a lecture with the title: “Rupture, invasion and inflammatory destruction of the intestinal barrier by *Shigella*, making sense of prokaryote–eukaryote cross-talks”. It appeared to be appropriate that the first André Lwoff Medal should go to an eminent scientist of the Institut Pasteur, the place where André Lwoff made his major scientific discoveries on bacteriophage transfections, discoveries that would later become part of the tools of genetic engineering. Together with Francois Jacob and Jaques Monod, André Lwoff won the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine in 1965.

**Development since 1975** Today, 37 national European Societies and 4 multinational Societies are members of FEMS. Altogether 32 countries are presented. Only in very few European countries have microbiologists not yet constituted their own societies—often due to political situations or changes—and thus could not join FEMS yet. As the superior aim of FEMS is to bring European microbiologists of all nations together and to support the increase in cooperative research, development and teaching in all fields of microbiology, it is hoped that these “white areas” on the FEMS map of Europe

will disappear soon. Since its foundation, FEMS has not only grown in membership but has gained characteristic structures. After FEMS had already been granted charitable status under United Kingdom law in 1975, which exempted it from paying income taxes, in 1998 it was (like most other UK-based scientific societies before) converted into a Company Limited by Guarantee (under UK law) for insurance and liability reasons. As no other European country offers better legal conditions, it is indispensable that the official legal base of FEMS remains in the United Kingdom. With the valuable help of Lex Scheffers of the Dutch Society, a Central Office of FEMS was set up in Delft (Netherlands) in 1997. In the hands of Dr. Diman van Rossum as Executive Officer (e-mail: [diman.vanrossum@fems-microbiology.org](mailto:diman.vanrossum@fems-microbiology.org)), the Delft office has since proven its enormous value for all activities of the Federation. The Executive Committee, after certain necessary changes of the original statutes by Council, now consists of the following officers: President (Raymond Auckenthaler, Switzerland), Vice President (Hans G. Trüper, Germany), Secretary General (Claudine Elmerich, France), Treasurer (John R. Norris, UK), Publications Manager (John C. Fry, UK), Meetings Secretary (Richard Braun, Switzerland), Member-at-Large (Godfried D. Vogels, Netherlands). Due to the considerable increase in publications, numbers of meetings and types and numbers of grants offered and provided by the Federation, three Management Boards have been set up, that include representatives of the delegates body of Council: The Publications Board consists of the Publications Manager as convener, the Chief Editors of the five FEMS Journals and one delegate representative; the Meetings Board consists of the Meetings Secretary as convener, the Member-at-Large and two delegate representatives; the Grants Board consists of the Member-at-Large as convener, the Vice-President and one delegate representative. FEMS Council convenes once a year in autumn in different European places and always in connection with a FEMS-sponsored scientific meeting, as this year in Sevilla. The Executive Committee and the Management Boards have at least two additional working meetings usually in the first two thirds of the year. The Management Boards govern the three main sets of tools installed by FEMS to serve the purpose of bringing European microbiologists together: publications, meetings and grants.

**Publications** In a fruitful cooperation with Elsevier Science Publishers in Amsterdam, FEMS at present publishes five journals, of which *FEMS Microbiology Letters* was started in 1977, followed by *FEMS Microbiology Reviews*, *FEMS Microbiology Ecology*, *FEMS Immunology and Medical Microbiology*, and to appear first in 2001, *FEMS Yeast Research*. The income earned by these journals and by symposia publications helped FEMS to build up a solid financial backup for its other tools. In agreement with Elsevier, for many years FEMS has offered department libraries in eastern European countries free annual subscriptions to FEMS journals, and these have been thankfully accepted. Twice a year FEMS publishes

a six-page (A4 size) circular that is distributed in numbers exceeding their membership to all member Societies. (Although FEMS is not always sure, but in hope, that the publication reaches always its destination.) The Circular informs about internal FEMS work, developments and changes, the meetings supported, finances, journals, membership, executive, news from member societies and a calendar of other meetings. Of course, FEMS is present in the Internet as well with its new website ([www.fems-microbiology.org](http://www.fems-microbiology.org)). To centralize the organizational work involved in publications, this year a Publication Office is being set up in direct connection with the FEMS Central Office in Delft.

**Meetings** The present meetings support scheme of FEMS consists of the following grants: (i) Young Scientists Grants (maximal 6200 euros); these are meant to enable young scientists such as doctoral students and postdocs to attend international scientific meetings. (ii) Meeting Support Grants (maximal 12,300 euros) to organize and sustain international meetings. (iii) Workshop Support Grants (maximal 15,000 euros) to organize and sustain international laboratory or method workshops. (iv) Start-up-Fund (maximal 10,000 euros); in this case, the money is provided for the organisational phase of a meeting, so that after the participation fees have been received, 80 % of the sum becomes redeemable. For all types of Grants, the application deadline is January 31st of the year preceding the meeting. This scheme is well established and functioning. Further types of meetings are being discussed, but so far have not found sufficient support in Council, such as, e.g. Pan-European Congresses of Microbiology.

**Grants** Individual fellowships are meant to assist younger scientists (less than 36 years of age) in pursuing research up to 3 months in a European country different from that in which he or she lives. A maximum of 3500 euros is granted to cover travelling and living costs. The application must be submitted to the FEMS delegate of the respective national Society, who will then endorse or reject it. In case of several applications submitted from one country, the delegate is asked to propose a ranking. Another type of grant is the Visiting Grant, through which FEMS provides the travel costs for an invited scientist (from another European country), as long as the host will carry the other costs.

**Finances** For a basic financial support, in 1975 it was agreed that the member Societies would pay FEMS 1.80 Swiss francs annually for each full-paying member. (The currency of Switzerland was chosen because of its high degree of value stability). Although in the first years this was the only income of FEMS, in 1998 membership fees made up just 5% of FEMS total income, whereas 82% came from net publication royalties

and 12% from investments. The expenditures in 1998 were 20% for Fellowships, 13% for Meeting Grants, 10% for Young Scientist Grants, 5% support costs, 22% for publications, 4% for editors' assistance costs, 3% for journals for eastern Europe, 22% for administration, 1% for President's fund. These values have been relatively stable over the last few years, although it is felt that the budget depends too strongly on the royalty side. FEMS has accumulated sufficient reserves and carefully invested these as documented above. The careful financial politics of FEMS are further expressed by proactive measures such as looking into possibilities for new ways for support.

**New activities.** Starting with the FEMS presidency of César Nombela in 1996 and continuing under Raymund Auckenthaler, the FEMS Executive Committee has had several brain-storming sessions to elucidate future ways of establishing even better communication and cooperation between European microbiologists themselves and between them and the public, e. g. in the field of public information about microbiology and public education in such a field. A first step and forerunner in this direction was the 1996 publication of a sixteen-page assessment on "Gene Technology in Microbiology: Benefits and Risks" representing the results of a working party led by Helena Mäkelä (FEMS President 1992–1995) and Richard Braun (now FEMS Meetings Secretary). Many of the smaller proposals that came out of these deliberations and discussions have meanwhile become parts of the general procedures in FEMS. A major step forward was a new website at a new domain ([www.fems-microbiology.org](http://www.fems-microbiology.org)), that FEMS launched in May 2000. It offers continuously updated information on the Federation and all of its activities, including information on Member Societies, Publications, Meetings (FEMS supported and others), Research-Fellows, and Visiting Scientists. Grant application forms can be downloaded from the site. The new website offers seamless links to the FEMS Journals, offering online abstracts and full texts, instructions to authors, search facilities, etc. Elsevier provides this online service to readers of FEMS Journals. The meeting pages of the website offer an extensive listing of about 200—mainly European—microbiology meetings.

**SEM and FEMS** Connections and cooperation between the Spanish Society for Microbiology (SEM) and FEMS have always been excellent. SEM has been one of the founders of FEMS. The 16th Meeting of FEMS Council took place September 16, 1989 in Madrid. Prof. César Nombela, President of SEM 1982–1990, served as Vice-President of FEMS 1991–1995 and was elected President of FEMS for the period 1995–1998. His presidency has been very fruitful and future-oriented for FEMS.

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The author is full professor of Microbiology at the Institute of Microbiology and Biotechnology of the University of Bonn, Germany. He works on microbial sulfur metabolism, osmoregulation by compatible solutes, bacterial systematics and nomenclature. He is Vice-President of FEMS, Honorary Member of SEM, and Associate Editor of INTERNATIONAL MICROBIOLOGY. He is also a doctor of medieval history.

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