

## A history of the British Society for Medical Mycology

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### Origins

The inaugural meeting of the British Society for Mycopathology (BSM) — now the British Society for Medical Mycology (BSMM) — took place in Birmingham in 1965. However, the BSM did not appear, fully formed, as if by magic from a clear sky. In the previous year, you could have met many or most of the same British medical mycologists gathering in Newcastle. The invited guest speaker that previous year was the yeast taxonomist Nicolaas Van Uden (who, by the way, was the husband of an Infanta of the Portuguese Royal Family). Indeed, annual meetings of UK medical mycologists for presentation of research papers and sponsoring invited guest speakers date back to 1953 in Exeter.

The society's earliest origins trace to around the end of World War I, with the creation of the Imperial Mycological Bureau (later the Commonwealth Mycological Institute; CMI) at Kew Gardens. The CMI was set up mainly as a reference centre for fungal plant pathogens, but its enthusiastic Director, Sir Edwin Butler, included fungal pathogens of humans firmly within its scope of interest (Ainsworth, 1978). An independent review of CMI activities in 1942 recommended formation of a Research Committee on Medical Mycology. This was seen as a matter appropriate for the Medical Research Council (MRC), which duly invited 11 individuals to become the MRC Committee on Medical Mycology: they first met on September 17<sup>th</sup> 1943 (Ainsworth, 1978; Homei, 2006; Ramsbottom, 1965).

Within 12 months of its first meeting, the MRC Committee had formed a Subcommittee on Taxonomy and Nomenclature (the "Working Party" concept goes back a long way) and the Committee's chairman, Dr. James T. Duncan, Reader in Medical Mycology at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), reported the results of a survey of fungal specimens that had passed through his hospital's laboratory (at Winchester) within the previous 8 months (Ainsworth, 1978; Ramsbottom, 1965). A year later, this report was expanded into a highly influential paper in the *British Medical Journal*, reporting a mycological survey of 1094 clinical specimens submitted by 140 colleagues (Duncan, 1945). Dr. Duncan was a major UK pioneer in medical mycology. In 1945 he was appointed as head of a new Sub-Department of Medical Mycology at the LSHTM. He also became first Director of the Mycological Reference Laboratory (MRL) of the Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS), which was then managed by the MRC. Dr. Duncan's dual role is the reason why the MRL was based for many years at the LSHTM.

Development of medical mycology within the UK moved rapidly between the mid-1940s and the landmark Exeter research meeting in 1953, which started the tradition of regular annual medical mycology meetings. The main foci for this development were the CMI and the LSHTM, with the MRC paying many of the bills. From the CMI came the publication *Annotated Bibliography of Medical Mycology*, which was renamed *Review of Medical and Veterinary Mycology* in 1951. In the days before on-line databases, the *Review* (known to aficionados as the RMVM) provided a great service, abstracting the world literature for publications on fungal disease. The association between the LSHTM and the PHLS/MRC also resulted in the creation of the National Collection of Pathogenic Fungi: the culture collection now managed from the MRL's present headquarters in Bristol.

Members of the fledgling MRC Committee produced a memorandum on the *Nomenclature of Fungi Pathogenic to Man and Animals* (Council, 1949). Today this may sound like a project of minor significance, but it led to a standardization of the names of mycoses and their causative agents, which previously depended a lot on the whims of individuals. The Memorandum sold more than 2,000 copies in its first 12 months. (Second, third and fourth editions were published in 1958, 1967 and 1977, respectively.)

For some years, the MRC Committee on Medical Mycology undertook appraisal of MRC grant applications in the fungal field. Among its many other activities, it collaborated with the Agricultural Research Council on a survey of fungal disease in farm animals and was involved in surveys on the prevalence of athlete's foot among coal miners and of mycetoma in Sudan (Ainsworth, 1978).

Geoffrey C. Ainsworth, in his 40s at the time the MRC Committee became active, was clearly a major driving force behind the development of the MRC Medical Mycology Committee. He became the Committee's Secretary in 1947 (Webster, 1999) and was a major contributor to the MRC Nomenclature Memorandum (Mackenzie, 1999). Ainsworth developed his career first at the CMI, then as a Wellcome Research Fellow working contemporaneously with Duncan at the LSHTM. He is one of the most famous 20<sup>th</sup> century names in British mycology. He was equally highly regarded by "pure" fungal biologists, plant pathologists, mushroom foragers and medical mycologists. He founded the International Mycological Association (Webster, 1999). Ainsworth and Bisby's *Dictionary of the Fungi*, a famous reference work for mycologists, is currently in its 10<sup>th</sup> edition.

For medical mycology, Ainsworth had two particular ambitions: to promote training in the discipline, and to provide a setting where medical mycologists could regularly gather and present and discuss their research. His particular affection for medical mycology showed when at the British Mycological Society meeting in 1950 (this is the society for "general" mycology) he gave his Presidential Address on "A Century of Medical and Veterinary Mycology in Britain" (Ramsbottom, 1965). An Ainsworth Medal has been struck in his honour by the International Mycological Association, and a building was named after him when the International Mycological Institute moved its premises from Kew to Egham, Surrey, in 1993 (Webster, 1999).

In 1953 Geoffrey Ainsworth's efforts paid off. He persuaded the MRC to fund an annual, informal medical mycology meeting. Ainsworth hosted the first meeting, in Exeter. It was attended by 35 individuals, who comprised a mixture of dermatologists, medical and veterinary mycologists and experimental scientists. The meeting was a success, and became an annual event (see separate historical list of meetings) with an average attendance of around 50 people each year. The style of these gatherings set the pattern for one of the hallmarks of the present BSMM meetings: relaxed and unpublished presentation of research work that allows attendees to "tell all you know".

By 1963 the MRC had advised the Committee it would not sponsor the annual meetings indefinitely. The future clearly lay in the creation of an independent, specialist society. Thus was born the British Society for Mycopathology. The decision was taken at the MRC Mycology Committee meeting in Newcastle in 1964, and we date our Society's origins from the Inaugural Meeting of the British Society for Mycopathology in Birmingham in 1965 (Ainsworth, 1978; Homei, 2006; Ramsbottom, 1965).

***Trends in the development of medical mycology are reflected in the Society's history***

It is instructive to take stock of the individuals who attended BSM meetings over its first 20 years or so. Our first President (1964–67), John Ramsbottom, was officially the “Keeper of Botany” at the British Museum. His specialist interest was, however, in fungi not plants; he was twice President of the British Mycological Society<sup>1</sup>. From the photograph of the inaugural meeting (Fig. 1) one can



recognize Yvonne Clayton, Gillian Midgley and Colin Campbell (diagnostic medical mycologists),

Fig. 1. Participants at the inaugural meeting of the British Society for Mycopathology, Birmingham, 1965. Photograph copied from *BSMM Newsletter*, Spring, 1998

Phyllis Stockdale (fungal taxonomist), James Gentles (medical mycologist, epidemiologist and developer of griseofulvin for human use), El Sheikh Mahgoub (physician with a research speciality in mycetoma), Friedrich Staib (veterinarian and medical doctor who undertook research with pathogenic yeasts), Joan Longbottom (chest disease specialist with a particular interest in fungi), and Rosalinde Hurley (obstetrician/gynaecologist and barrister; *Candida* researcher). These and other people present at the first BSM meeting<sup>2</sup> represent a very wide range of professional specialities, all of whom had a diagnostic or research interest in fungal disease — often both. However, the people attending in 1965 did *not* include representatives from the clinical specialities we nowadays regard as those with a particular interest in invasive fungal disease: haematologists and cancer specialists, intensive care physicians, infectious disease physicians, etc. The migration of medical mycology away from its origins in dermatology and gynaecology dates from the 1980s. By that decade,

<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia website entry for John Ramsbottom, April 2014.

<sup>2</sup> BSM Meeting programme, 1965

diagnosis and treatment of superficial fungal infections had become relatively straightforward, while the medical advances that predispose patients to disseminated mycoses, particularly those involving immunosuppression and transplant surgery, were resulting in growing numbers of new types of patients susceptible to life-threatening fungal disease — and new challenges for diagnosis and treatment.

By the year 2000, the dominant topics presented at BSMM meetings, and the interests of those attending them, as represented in the meeting programmes and abstracts, had shifted away perceptibly from the original emphases on diagnosis, pathology and treatment of patients with fungal disease to more basic aspects of research on fungal pathogens and their interactions with mammalian hosts. This trend reflects the general evolution of biomedical research towards a community with chiefly “molecular” training and experience. BSMM meetings nevertheless continue to retain their underlying interest in applying basic research to solve clinical problems — particularly those of diagnosis. Clinically qualified individuals have always formed a minority of those regularly attending the BSMM, but they play a highly significant role in sustaining a vision of the ultimate purpose of research into fungi that cause human disease.

### ***The annual meeting***

As already mentioned, by the time of the formation of the BSM in 1965, the nature and content of the annual meetings had already become established by the MRC Committee. Participants presented papers describing their research, which included accounts of fungi identified from clinical samples, pathological descriptions of fungi in tissue sections, clinical case reports and results of basic research with fungal pathogens. Usually, but not always, there was a guest lecture given by a mycologist of note invited from outside the UK.

A hallmark of the annual meetings was that the proceedings were informal; nothing presented or discussed at the meeting was ever published, although abstracts of presentations have been presented to attendees from time to time. This rule, together with the sense participants had of medical mycology as a small biomedical speciality, gave the meetings a delightful, “family” atmosphere. Newcomers could present their papers, including research studies in progress, without fear of a hostile, critical response from the audience. The BSM provided a first-class proving ground for oral presentations from young scientists starting their careers.

For many years, the meetings invariably took place in university halls of residence, to keep participants’ costs low, and in a different town each year. They were routinely held in the week that ended in Good Friday, thus affording participants the opportunity to extend their trip away from their home bases into the Easter holiday. With few exceptions, meetings began after lunch on the Monday afternoon, ran all day on the Tuesday, and ended at lunchtime on the Wednesday of the pre-Easter week. This arrangement allowed for a social visit to a local place of interest or a civic reception on the Monday evening, and a formal Annual Dinner on the Tuesday evening.

A few participants arrived on the Sunday before the meeting. These were either people whose transport opportunities precluded arrival in time for the Monday afternoon meeting start, or keen golfers, who played an annual BSM tournament on the Monday morning.

This arrangement of dates and times remained consistent until 1986, when the growing number of offered presentations meant a longer meeting was needed. In 1986, the meeting started at 9.30 on the Monday morning; most participants travelled to the meeting on the Sunday. The Monday morning start has remained the norm ever since; indeed, for several years, poster sessions, discussion sessions and even some oral presentations have been scheduled on the Sunday evenings<sup>3</sup>.

The dates of each year's meeting are no longer strictly attached to those of Easter, and the venue now is as likely to be a hotel as university accommodation. These changes reflect the competitive nature of the "conference market", and a growing disenchantment of participants with accommodation that often provided draughty rooms and communal bathroom facilities.

### ***Symposia, guest lectures and other special events***

By 1978, the invited guest lecture had become a regular, rather than an optional feature of the annual meetings, and a decision was taken to name the annual lecture the Ian Murray Lecture, in recognition of a former Director of the Mycological Reference Laboratory who died prematurely. The first Ian Murray Lecturer, at the Leicester meeting in 1978, was our old friend Geoffrey Ainsworth. At the Annual General Meeting in 1994, the annual guest lecture was rechristened the "Foundation Lecture", a title that has been retained ever since. Also in 1994, the name of the Society was changed from "British Society for Mycopathology" to "British Society for Medical Mycology". Both changes were first implemented at the 1995 annual meeting.

The first time a symposium on a dedicated topic was included at an annual meeting was in 1987 (Anon, 1987). No guest speakers were invited; instead, those offering papers for presentation were encouraged to suggest their paper could be included in the symposium (on fungal antigens). In the event, the symposium comprised only two presentations. However, the concept of the specialized symposium had been introduced, and has evolved into a regular feature over the years, usually based around invited guest speakers rather than offered presentations. The inclusion of symposia often stimulates attendance at meetings by individuals who do not attend the BSMM regularly but who have a strong interest in the symposium topic.

Poster presentations, in the most general sense of the term, have been a feature at annual meetings since the Society's inception. They have included (among many other examples) informal photographs of events at the previous year's meeting and demonstrations of aspects of fungal taxonomy, clinical and experimental pathology and epidemiology. Today, there are invariably poster presentations of research projects. The scientific poster solves the conundrum arising because most research funding authorities will only reimburse the cost of an individual's attendance at a meeting when that person is presenting their work at the meeting. Yet there is usually insufficient programme time to allow everyone to deliver their work orally.

From time to time, the BSMM has held meetings devoted to particular themes in medical mycology, outwith the regular annual meetings. The first of these was a one-day meeting on "Molecular Mycology" in 1988. This was followed by meetings on "*Aspergillus* and aspergillosis" (1990), "Trends in the Management of Fungal Infection" (1991), the "Fungal Cell Wall" (1995), "Genomics of Fungal

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<sup>3</sup> See historical BSM/BSMM meetings programmes.

Pathogens” (2000) and “Blood and Fungi” organized jointly by the BSMM and the British Society for Haematology in 2005.

The BSMM membership has always included a substantial number of individuals based outside the UK, some of whom have attended many annual meetings. Their number comprises 20–25% of the membership list<sup>4</sup>. The Society’s international relations led to an invitation from the Danish Society for Medical Mycology for BSMM members to attend its annual meeting in Ebeltoft in 1976. In return, the BSMM annual meeting in 1981 was held jointly with a delegation from the Danish Society. In 1989, the Society once again visited Scandinavia, this time for a joint meeting with the Swedish and Danish societies, held in Gothenborg, Sweden. The 1998 annual BSMM meeting in Glasgow was a particularly large and prestigious event, since it formed part of that year’s meeting of the European Confederation of Medical Mycology, with attendees from all parts of the continent.

### ***Working parties***

A Society with a membership of around 200 specialists forms an excellent basis for smaller groups to undertake narrowly focussed projects for the general benefit of all. We have already seen that such activities were undertaken from the earliest days of the original MRC Committee. Several working parties have met and deliberated on behalf of the Society. There were reports from no fewer than five working parties minuted at the 2012 Annual General Meeting (AGM). Two working parties have concerned themselves with issues of manpower and training in medical mycology (there never seem to be enough people specialized in diagnostic medical mycology). The deliberations of several BSMM working groups resulted in tangible outcomes in the form of publications. These include the working party on fungal antigens, whose 1976 publication became known as “The Little Black Book” (a laboratory manual on serology of fungal infection), the working group on nomenclature of pathogenic fungi, whose recommendations appeared as a new edition of MRC Memorandum 23 in 1977, and the working group on methods for antifungal drugs, which generated a paper describing laboratory methods for susceptibility testing with flucytosine in 1984 (Mycology, 1984).

The 1990s working group on diagnostic mycology and standards of care generated four peer-reviewed publications, including guidelines for clinicians investigating putative cases of fungal disease (Denning et al., 1997; Mycology, 1996) and proposed standards of care for patients with fungal infections (Denning et al., 1995; Denning et al., 2003). A follow-up working group published a national audit examining how well the standards of care were applied (Schelenz et al., 2009). Clearly the activities of BSMM working parties have made nationally and even internationally recognized contributions to the field.

### ***Education and training***

From the early days of Geoffrey Ainsworth’s involvement in the MRC Medical Mycology Committee, there has been a strongly expressed desire for the British Society to provide training in medical mycology. The need for mycology education has been addressed several times in the form of occasional lecture courses, but two BSMM initiatives merit special mention, since they have become

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<sup>4</sup> Data from Secretary’s annual reports, minutes of Annual General Meetings.

long-established and highly respected opportunities for in-depth training of those wishing to become professionally specialized as medical mycologists.

The first of these is the BSMM one-week course in diagnostic medical mycology. This was the brainchild of Professor Glyn Evans. He organized the first course in Leeds in 1976. The 30 participants enjoyed a mixture of lectures and laboratory practical classes, presented by experts from among the Society's membership. The participants' feedback indicated that this course met their needs and desires for deeper understanding particularly of diagnostic techniques in medical mycology. The balance sheet for the meeting showed it was a financial as well as an educational success. The "Leeds course" has since been repeated every 2–3 years. The fourteenth course was held in Leeds in 2012. The course has been managed by Dr Ruth Ashbee since 2004.

The second major educational effort from the BSMM arose from the vision of Professor Chris Kibbler, whose dedication and perseverance, despite many financial and technical obstacles resulted in a course, organized jointly by the BSMM and by University College London (UCL), leading to a Postgraduate Diploma in Medical Mycology. The first intake of six Diploma students was in 2004, with further students subsequently enrolled on an annual basis. Modular teaching is currently done via the internet, with video recordings of mycology experts lecturing on specialized topics, and via practical classes undertaken at the Mycology Reference Laboratories in Leeds and Bristol. Diploma students study the modules over a 2- to 4-year period and are examined at intervals on written essays and practical class performance. At the time of writing (2014), the course has grown to offer students the opportunity to obtain a Postgraduate Certificate in Medical Mycology (based on fewer course modules) or an MSc degree, based on the same modules as Diploma students plus an original research project. UCL acts as educational host for the courses and ensures rigorous academic standards for accreditation.

### ***Honouring outstanding individuals.***

For almost its entire history, the BSMM has included a category of membership — Honorary Membership — which is awarded at Annual General Meetings to members "... who have made a notable contribution to medical or veterinary mycology and/or to the work of the Society". By 2014, 55 individuals had been awarded Honorary Membership.

In 1986, the Annual General Meeting agreed that the Society should institute a prize "To encourage and reward young scientists in the field of mycopathology." It was agreed that the prize should be given from time to time to individuals who have made an "exceptional" contribution to the field. Perhaps because of this criterion, and perhaps to the Society's credit, the prize has indeed been awarded only exceptionally: at the time of writing there have been just three recipients.

The first BSM Prize awardee was Neil A.R. Gow, in 1987. Gow's subsequent research career, building to his present status as Professor and leader of one of Europe's largest fungal research groups (in Aberdeen) confirms the promise reflected for the Society's choice for its first prize recipient. The two subsequent prize winners are Andrew J. Hamilton (1993; King's College, London — now retired from research) and Derek Sullivan (2003; Trinity College, Dublin — Sullivan is the co-discoverer of the species *Candida dubliniensis*).

### ***BSMM members in the larger world of mycology — medical and non-medical***

The BSMM is formally affiliated to the International Society for Human and Animal Mycology (ISHAM) and to the European Confederation of Medical Mycology (ECMM). Members of the BSMM have often played a significant role in the activities of both these “umbrella” organizations, particularly ISHAM. Of the 18 mycologists who have served as Presidents of ISHAM, six were UK BSMM members, and a seventh is currently ISHAM President-Elect. Three other ISHAM Presidents were overseas members of the BSMM. For all but four of its first 33 years since its inception in 1961, the ISHAM Journal — originally *Sabouraudia*, now *Medical Mycology* — was edited by members of the BSMM, and three UK BSMM members are among the 27 individuals who have been honoured with the prestigious ISHAM award and medal for their contributions to mycology research. Two BSMM members have served as Presidents of the ECMM.

The remarkable position of Professor Geoffrey Ainsworth as a general as well as a medical mycologist was referred to earlier. He was President of the Section of Medical Mycology at the 8<sup>th</sup> International Botanical Congress in Paris in 1954, Honorary Life President of the International Mycological Association (from 1977), and winner of the Linnean Medal for Botany in 1980 (Webster, 1999). Such prestige for BSMM members outside of medical mycological organizations is unusual; however, in this context it should be noted that Professor Neil Gow has also enjoyed recognition in the more general field of mycology and microbiology. He won the Berkeley Award from the British Mycological Society in 1992, and the Society for General Microbiology’s Fleming Award in 1993 and their Marjorie Stephenson Prize in 2013. He was President of the British Mycological Society from 2001 to 2003.

### ***BSMM: politics and governance***

Originally, the BSMM was managed by a democratically elected Executive Committee comprising three officials — President, Secretary and Treasurer — and two other members. Constitutionally, the Executive can act on behalf of the Society in the period between Annual General Meetings. At present, the term of office for Treasurers is 5 years, for Presidents two years and for other committee members 3 years. Local organizers of each year’s annual meeting have been routinely co-opted to the committee for the 12 months preceding each meeting. In recent years, the committee has been expanded to include a meetings secretary (responsible for organizing the programme since 1993), and a third (since 1994) and a fourth (since 2013) committee member. Local organizers of the two upcoming annual meetings are now also co-opted to the committee.

The BSMM became a registered charity in 1995. Its written constitution has been revised many times by a two-thirds majority vote at Annual General Meetings. Revisions have included removal of the original clause limiting the numbers of members of the Society, technical changes to wording required when the Society became a charity, institution of Honorary and Life Membership categories, etc.

### ***The annual BSMM sing-song***

By no means everything that happens within the Society has to do with fungi. There has always been a strong social side to its annual meetings. The most consistent of these is the after-dinner

sing-song, in which members exercise their vocal cords around the piano. As recalled by former BSMM President, Dr Roland Davies, the sing-song first arose spontaneously when a small group of meeting attendees in Cambridge (1972) found a piano in a room adjacent to the uncomfortably overpopulated bar. Dr Seamus O'Sullivan, mycologist at the Glasgow Veterinary School, saw a piano in the room and began to play songs, as he often did for friends. The event was repeated the following year and rapidly became established as a regular social feature of each meeting. Seamus O'Sullivan became too ill to attend BSMM meetings after 1988 and the author of this history took over as piano player in 1989.

### **Conclusion**

The BSMM in the early twenty-first century is a dynamic organization, busily involved in providing medical mycology training, funding attendance of its members at international meetings and operating many working parties that often produce outputs of national and international significance. Its annual meetings retain much of the original mixture of formality and informality that leave attendees with a strong sense of gain. The comment is often heard that one benefits as much or more from the informal discussions between medical mycologists as from the programmed presentations.

The Society has managed to maintain its independent status for 50 years since its inaugural meeting in 1965, while other narrowly specialized biomedical societies have failed or merged with larger "umbrella" groups. Its success owes much to the hard work of its officials, who devote much time and effort to the BSMM during their periods of office.

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### ***Author's statement and acknowledgements***

I first attended a BSM meeting in 1968 and have been a “regular” ever since, missing only four meetings during the following 46 years. The idea of writing this brief history arose when I was invited to present the 2014 Foundation Lecture on the topic of the BSMM history. The 2014 meeting was the 50<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the Society and my lecture topic formed part of the celebrations. To prepare for the talk (and this history) I read through every copy of the *BSMM Newsletter* (first published in July, 1977, and authored by Colin Campbell), all the minutes published for Annual General Meetings since the inaugural, 1965 meeting, and most of the meeting programmes from 1965. In this task I was greatly assisted by the kindness of Colin Campbell, who accessed the oldest programmes and several lists of participants at the earliest meetings, and of Richard Hobson, who trusted me with the loan of the bound copies of AGM minutes, which cover the period 1965–2007. From 2008 the AGM minutes have been published routinely in issues of the *BSMM Newsletter*.

Statements in this history are supported with references to published material as far as possible. Where sources are not cited, the information comes mainly from programmes, minutes and newsletter. I have tried to rely as little as possible on my own memories of events, but of course I accept all responsibility for any errors, particularly in material concerning the older parts of the history of which I had no personal experience.

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