

Reflections of Secretary Generalship: Rashad Barsoum's Diary Account of his 1999-2005 Term

Pushing paper toward digitalization

In former times ISN leadership used to run the Society through their offices in their respective parts of the world, which were essentially staffed for medical rather than business purposes. As Jan Weening however was approaching the end of his 1993-1999 Secretary General term, the Executive Committee decided to keep the Secretariat permanently based in Amsterdam to avoid the hassle of moving heaps of files and documents to the new Secretary General's office, and to make use of the enormously valuable experience that his Secretary, Ilja Huang, had gained over the previous 6 years.

This was my first challenge when I was appointed in June 1999; how would I run the Secretary General Office from Cairo while the bulk of work is located two thousand miles away? The answer was digitalization. It was possible to convert almost everything into electronic files, and with the help of the internet the offices in Cairo and Amsterdam became closely integrated, files were instantly exchanged and communication was literally seamless. I consequently paid very few visits to the Amsterdam office during my tenure; only when important issues required a physical meeting such as when we finely-tuned the Fellowship Program, launched the first ISN website, and when we developed the on-line voting system with the technical support of Onno de Boer in the Amsterdam Medical Center (AMC).

I had a very promising ISN-dedicated Secretary, Vivi Michel, who served for one year before getting married and immigrating to Canada. She was succeeded by Soha Sobhi, a bright pharmacist with excellent executive talents. Soha built on what Vivi had achieved and became a fully integrated member of the staff network running the Society in Cairo (Secretary General's Office), Amsterdam (permanent Secretariat), Atlanta (Treasurer's Office), Little Rock (President's Office), St Louis (Editor's Office) and Toronto (COMGAN Headquarters).

Centralization – shaping the future of the Society

Things were set to radically change. At the December 2001 ISN Executive Committee Retreat I proposed the standardization of the Policies and Procedures of different ISN Offices with two key objectives in mind: to avoid the fluctuations that may occur following the change of leadership, and to seek expert opinion on whether what ISN was doing was sufficiently professional and optimal.

The idea was received with great enthusiasm and taken further during that same meeting to a decision of consulting an expert on the appropriate strategic structure for a Society the size and breadth of the ISN. The name of Judy Thomas was raised on the basis of previous involvement in a similar task with the ASN. William G. Couser, the then ISN Vice President stepped out of the meeting for a few minutes to make a phone call; he came back with the great news that Judy had readily accepted the proposal.

President-Elect, Robert Atkins was one of the most enthusiastic leaders involved in professionalizing the management of ISN. It was during his ISN Presidency that the major transformation took place. He had already previously sought the opinion of several experts and held a 'think tank' meeting in July 2001, where several strategic thoughts were entertained, resulting in a series of extremely constructive proposals. Judy Thomas presented her report during the Executive Committee Retreat in June 2002, in which she recommended that ISN should move to professional management rather than remaining in the hands of amateurs! Her report was consequently approved. Several management firms submitted their proposals and were short-listed by a small Committee chaired by Robert Atkins.

The top four applicants were interviewed in the Executive meeting in November 2002. In parallel two individuals proposed by Judy Thomas for the post of Chief Executive Officer in the new structure of the ISN. While a tentative decision was made on the most appropriate management company, a firm decision was taken to appoint Tom Reiser as CEO. I still recall how vivid, outspoken, enthusiastic and experienced this young man was, and the positive comments that were made by each and every member of the Executive on that day.

The decision was taken further by Robert Atkins and Jan Weening, the then the President-Elect, who made a site visit to Brussels and, together with Norbert Lamiere, visited several proposed management companies. The final choice was GIC, which also approved appointing Tom Reiser to be responsible for ISN affairs. Again with the help of Judy Thomas, GIC interviewed all the ISN Offices through site and exchange visits and took over partially on the 1st of April 2003. It was to have full responsibilities of the Secretariat and Treasurer's Office in phase I, and COMGAN at a later stage, perhaps in 2005.

ISN's Global Headquarters and permanent base was established in 2003 incorporating a full team of professional staff to manage ISN's membership, programs, conferences and fund raising. This development changed the face of ISN completely.

The Global Headquarters – marking a new ISN era

Any doubts about the centralization of management vanished within a few months of witnessing the professionalism of knowledgeable and highly dedicated staff. At the time though I remember that there was some concern that running the Society so professionally would undermine the warmth of interaction between the leadership and membership. The special ISN leadership – membership relationship has however since been perfectly maintained and the visible role of leaders communicated through all of ISN's communication channels.

With the administrative efforts going on behind scenes, the role of the Secretary General changed from previously being burdened by a myriad of administrative functions, to

having the time and space to work on strategy-planning, focus on the future of the Society, its integrity, collegiality, creativity and ethical commitment.

It is in part thanks to the highly productive interaction between the leadership and staff that several new concepts have been introduced into ISN management such as strategic planning meetings, fund-raising campaigns, integration with other global organizations concerned with health, the role of ISN in prevention of kidney disease (recently culminating in essential initiatives such as World Kidney Day). ISN's publications have also become much more appealing and the ISN's former Website has developed into the current Nephrology Gateway.

ISN President and Secretary General – a synchronized partnership

I consider myself very fortunate to have held the position of Secretary General during a phase of major transformation for ISN. I have worked with wonderful Presidents; Tom Andreoli, who enthusiastically supported the broad representation of the developing world in ISN Leadership by adding new Councilors and restructuring the Executive Committee to include the COMGAN Chair and at least one member from each of the developing regions. This also necessitated a change in the Constitution, which was one of my major tasks during his tenure, leading to the 2001 Constitution.

Robert Atkins followed. During his short tenure of 18 months he rapidly translated the aforementioned strategic idea into a reality and implemented a functional management system with full relay of responsibilities to the new team.

Jan Weening assumed ISN Presidency in 2003. He consolidated the new structure firmly and gently and strongly supported the scientific image of ISN, which he rightly felt had regressed slightly during the fever of global expansion of ISN. He made several important decisions in this direction, perhaps the most important being the association of ISN with Nature Publishing Group, which is now the official ISN Publisher taking of *Kidney International*, *Nature Clinical Practice Nephrology* and the Nephrology Gateway.

Nature Clinical Practice Nephrology, launched in November 2005, is the Society's clinically orientated journal that has gone from strength to strength with Robert Schrier as the Editor-in-Chief and Suzanne Farley as the Executive Editor at the helm. Jan Weening's term also witnessed the introduction of a new series of ISN Meetings – the Nexus Symposia – specifically designed to respond to a growing need for programs that not only bring together researchers and practicing clinicians to gain insight into specific topics relating to the kidney, but also directly link research to real clinical challenges.

Strengthening the Constitution

My term as Secretary-General in 2005 ended when William G. Couser became President. Although I was not in a position to witness his significant impact on the various ISN Programs, I was charged with the task of revising the ISN Constitution once more to better reflect and respond to the needs of the Society.

I chaired a committee which proposed a new version that addressed the modified structure of ISN, job description of the Executive members, Councilors, Committees and management staff. It ensured appropriate involvement of the Council in strategy planning and auditing. The proposed Constitutional amendments were discussed and approved by the Council in November 2006, to be ratified by the membership during the General Assembly meeting at the 2007 World Congress of Nephrology, April 21-25, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

The differences between the San Francisco (2001) and Rio (2007) Constitutions reflect the major and exciting changes in the mission, strategy and administration of ISN. I consider myself truly privileged to have played such a central role as Secretary General and in contributing to the wonderful evolution of ISN through helping to re-define the Constitutions.