

Dermatologic surgery in the UK; the past, present and future

Dr Richard Motley

In July 1982 at the British Association of Dermatologists meeting in Dundee, Dr Stanley Comaish, Dr Rodney Dawber, Dr Michael Dahl and Dr Peter Kersey met to consider the formation of a group with an interest in the surgical aspects of dermatology.

Stan Comaish had worked in Philadelphia and had been impressed by the rapid growth of the dermatological surgery in the USA. The group was also aware of the interest in the subject in Spain and Germany.

The four agreed to form a British Dermatological Surgery Group - whose aims would be to promote interest, stimulate research and disseminate information on all aspects of dermatological surgery. The group held an inaugural meeting, one year later, at the BAD meeting in London.

The major decision was taken to initiate a series of workshops to enhance surgical skills and the first workshop was held in Newcastle in April 1984. The meeting was co-sponsored by the International Society for Dermatologic Surgery and Perry Robins, Robert Baran, George Popkin and Michael Nix contributed.

The local senior plastic surgeon in Newcastle had worked with Perry Robins and Fred Mohs in Wisconsin, but was not a supporter of dermatologists undertaking surgery.

The dermatologists were aware of strong resistance from some surgeons who were opposed to dermatologists undertaking surgery. Debates with surgeons followed in Oxford at a Dowling Club Educational Weekend and at a joint meeting with plastic surgeons at the Royal Society of Medicine in December 1984.

Despite this, in 1984 a formal complaint was laid before the President of the Royal College of Surgeons by the plastic surgeons that dermatologists were attempting procedures beyond their ability and training. A meeting with Sir Terence English, Professor John Alexander-Williams (of Birmingham) and Dr Harvey Baker (then President of BAD) quickly rejected this attack. I was, at that time, the BAD Trainees' representative and remember well the quiet dignity with which the case for dermatological surgery was made by Harvey Baker.

In September 1986 the ISDS annual meeting came to London where members of the local organising committee included Rodney Dawber, Peter Holt, Bill Bowers, Peter Kersey, Michael Dahl, Tim Sonnex and Stanley Comaish.

Images from Dr Motley's speech



Perry Robins



Antonio Picoto



**Drs Peter Holt, Larry Field
and Richard Motley**



**Les Millard, Dowling Munro,
Neil Walker**



**Cliff Lawrence, Peter
Kersey, John Cook**



Bill Bowers



Grahman Colver

There were a lot of challenges to learning the new discipline of dermatological surgery - there were few textbooks or photographs and little professional guidance away from meetings. Several dermatological surgeons from the USA, including Dan Siegel and Roy Grekin, played pivotal roles as lecturers, demonstrators and mentors at early workshop meetings. I met them at the BSDS workshop in Oxford, hosted by Dr Rodney Dawber, in 1987.

In 1988 the ISDS returned to Edinburgh. At that time the President of the Congress was Michael Dahl and Graham Colver was secretary. 93 papers were presented including 21 from the UK. At this time, as a registrar enthused with the opportunities within dermatological surgery, I was introduced to Dr Perry Robins – a Mohs surgeon from New York and founder of the Journal of Dermatologic Surgery and Oncology, Dr Antonio Picoto – a Mohs surgeon from Lisbon, Portugal, and Dr Larry Field – Dermatological surgeon from California. All three were founder members of the ISDS.

Dr Larry Field was a constant source of information and inspiration and twice spent time in Cardiff teaching and practising dermatological surgery, not a day passes that we do not do something that we learnt directly from Larry - he fully deserves his recognition as the most important international teacher of dermatological surgery.

In 1989, I attended an excellent course on Superficial anatomy and cutaneous surgery, run by Dr Hugh Greenway in San Diego, with a faculty of the best known dermatological surgeons in the USA. Many UK dermatologists would subsequently go to this meeting.

I subsequently trained in Mohs surgery with Dr Antonio Picoto in Lisbon and many dermatologists from the UK followed me to Lisbon for training with him. As a dermatology registrar in the late 1980's / early 1990's a career in dermatological surgery was far from certain. Those established Consultant Dermatologists who had an interest in surgery were progressively pushing back the barriers to surgical practice, but no one was advertising posts for a Dermatologist with an interest in surgery.

I met Chris Zachary who had spent a year in USA undertaking dermatological surgery. He returned briefly to UK then left to set up practice in the USA. A number of UK dermatologists would subsequently undertake training fellowships with him.

Neil Walker came next and had his big break when Professor Malcolm Greaves offered him one session per week at St John's Hospital, with that Neil was able to set up a dermatological surgery practice and became an inspiration to us all.

Following Neil; Andrew Markey, Nick Telfer and myself were all appointed to consultant posts with a specific remit for skin cancer and dermatological / Mohs surgery.

Within a short time of this GP fundholding was introduced and many dermatology units started to take an interest in employing dermatological surgeons because of the financial advantages of undertaking surgery 'in house'.

In 1996 I established a 1-year fellowship post in Dermatological surgery in Cardiff and we now have our 15th fellow. We also provided shorter periods of training for other dermatologists and over 50 of the UK dermatologists who practice dermatological surgery received training in Cardiff. Similar fellowship programmes were created in London, Oxford, Newcastle, Nottingham and Leeds and contributed to the training of Dermatologists in Dermatological surgery in the UK.

Throughout these developments, the BSDS has remained pivotal by organising annual training workshops, which remain the best way of learning and teaching dermatological surgery. It was my pleasure to present a brief history of Dermatological Surgery in the UK at the 30th BSDS workshop, held in Birmingham in 2013.

The Future of Dermatological Surgery in the UK:

One thing has changed - it is no longer difficult to get information about dermatological surgery. The creation of the World Wide Web and search engines such as Google, means that information is at our fingertips at all times. However, there is a gap between having the knowledge and being able to competently undertake surgery - and practical workshops and fellowship training programmes will remain essential for training future dermatological surgeons.

The easy availability of information also means that our patients are increasingly well-informed and will demand procedures such as Mohs surgery when indicated - it will become difficult for dermatology departments that do not provide Mohs surgery to be considered as adequately providing care for patients with skin cancers.

Dermatological surgery has risen rapidly as a speciality within the UK but there is still considerable unmet demand for Dermatological surgeons in the UK. Too many patients are still denied access to Mohs surgery or undergo inappropriate surgical procedures undertaken by surgeons without training in Dermatology. Much has been achieved but there is still much more to do.

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