Introduction

The beginnings of a society

Every year Australian microbiologists gather. The locations alternate – Perth, Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide, and all over Australia. They gather to discuss the science of microbiology. The gatherings are world-renowned and attract high-profile speakers from Australia and around the world. Associated with the gatherings are highly anticipated traditions, the Rubbo Oration, the Frank Fenner Research Award, the ringing of the Nancy Atkinson Bell and the annual dinner to name just a few. These gatherings – the first one dating back to 1959 – are organised and coordinated by the Australian Society for Microbiology (ASM), which also came into being in 1959, and which in 2009 celebrates its 50th year of existence.

The journey of the ASM has been extraordinary. The Society was the brainchild of a small group of scientists – microbiologists – who were gathered at a Congress of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS) in 1958. They had a meeting to discuss their idea; around 50 microbiologists attended. At this meeting, they agreed that there was a strong need to form a society – a society for microbiology. After the ANZAAS Congress their idea was carefully and thoughtfully massaged into existence over the following 12 months. It was in this way that life was breathed into the Australian Society for Microbiology.

The Australian Society for Microbiology was established originally as a learned society. It was dedicated to the science of microbiology. It was also a federal society. A National Council comprising a President, Vice President, Honorary Secretary, Honorary Treasurer and representatives from each of the states met several times a year to oversee the activities of the state branches, coordinate the Annual Scientific Meetings and, perhaps most significantly, to actively foster and provide a voice for the discipline of microbiology in Australia.

The ASM rapidly expanded in terms of its membership body and the roles and functions it provided, both to members and to the wider scientific and non-scientific community. The Scientific Meetings became an annual event and by the mid 1960s membership numbers had climbed to over 600. The Federal Council, as well as the state branches, were increasingly called upon to participate in government committees and advisory groups and to offer advice and microbiological expertise. However, by the mid 1970s the ASM faced a turning point that would change the nature of the association and the course of its history. In 1976 the Australian Society for Microbiology became an incorporated society. At this time the ASM made several changes to its structure and scope. It became a national rather than federal body and expanded the levels of membership it offered to so that it accredited microbiologists and was able to provide increased support for those working outside of the university environment.

It was a time that could have either strengthened the ASM or torn it apart. However, as a direct result of the careful and considered way that incorporation, nationalisation and professionalisation were proposed and eventually introduced, the changes saw the ASM enter a new phase of life and become an even more dynamic organisation – an even stronger voice of and for microbiologists in Australia. The events that occurred during the first decades of the ASM’s life – the rapid growth and then the decision to incorporate in the mid 1970s – are just the beginning. They are
the foundation of a story of the origins and growth of a dynamic organisation that, today, continues to thrive. Throughout the 1980s, 1990s and to the present day, the ASM has continued to grow and develop as a learned and professional society.

As the ASM enters its 50th year of existence, it is time to look back and reflect on some of its major achievements. This history does exactly that. It looks briefly at how microbiology emerged in Australia and how the ASM grew as microbiology began to establish itself as a stand-alone discipline. It looks at the early years of the Society – the growth and strengthening of the Scientific Meetings, the services the ASM provided to its members and the expansion of roles that led to incorporation, growth and professionalisation. The history then follows the Society through the 1980s, 1990s and the early years of this century and looks at the ways in which the ASM has continued to develop and adapt so that it can continue to support microbiologists and microbiology in Australia today.

From its earliest days, the federal body acknowledged that the strength of the ASM lay in the health and vitality of the state branches. The relationship between the federal body of the ASM and the state branches changed significantly over time. Some of this will be detailed in the story that follows. However, the focus of this narrative is the federal body of the ASM. While each state branch has a rich and dynamic history – and indeed each could be the subject of a stand-alone story – discussion of the origins and beginnings of each of the branches is limited in this text. Short narrative pieces detailing unique and colourful elements of the Annual Scientific Meetings as well as biographies of some of the outstanding contributors to Australian microbiology and to the ASM are also contained in the text. These pieces highlight some of the individuals and traditions that have contributed to the character and identity of the ASM today.

The pages that follow are a history of the Australian Society for Microbiology. They are a history of the organisation, of its character and of its identity. This is not a history of microbiology in Australia; rather, it touches on the beginnings of the discipline in this country to create a picture of the environment in which the Society emerged. It is not a history of the science; rather, the story of the society that was created, proactively, by a small group of pioneering individuals. This group of individuals recognised the need to formally bring the discipline together under the auspices of the Australian Society for Microbiology – a society that they hoped would support microbiologists and the science that is pivotal to our lives. By looking at this history, where the Society has come from, and all that it has accomplished, we can celebrate its achievements and look towards its future.

Microbiology in the news – some of the issues that have made headlines over the years, bringing the discipline to the attention of the public. Images courtesy Val Asche.