Dear colleagues,

We can expect to see the beginnings of some changes in ASM over the next couple of years, as work begun by my predecessors in this role begins to take shape.

Annual national meetings in recent years are still attended by up to 700 registrants in total, with sometimes more than 300 in a single plenary. ASM Melbourne 2014 was a big success, and well attended (685 registrants, compared with 557 in Adelaide 2013 and 692 in Brisbane 2012). Sir Gustav Nossal’s public lecture, reviewing the triumphs and challenges of vaccination, was standing-room only.

The value of listening to exciting advances outside your own discipline/area of expertise is surely self-evident and is available most readily at a national general meeting like ours. Nevertheless, we are all subject to increased specialisation in microbiology – a focussed conference may be preferred to a general national meeting at the same or similar cost. Similarly, professional microbiologists in hospitals and industry are telling us they are less well supported to attend meetings than in previous times. The high cost of venue hire/catering and the tyranny of distance makes it difficult to cover costs at our broad general meeting but members have relatively recently voted in favour of maintaining the annual event so there are no plans to depart from this unless and until it is reconsidered.

However, there is some interest in new meetings. Some specialist areas have long separated from ASM (BacPath and the ASA, Australian Society of Antimicrobials), some have sprung up to fill a perceived gap (e.g. the MMM, Molecular Microbiology Meeting in Sydney), while some are still ideas (ASM Clinical, ASM Environmental/Ecology, ASM Genomics/Bioinformatics) that need to be worked through, but it is important that we move the Society to meet the needs of the microbiologists of Australia. We must aim to become a broad church by providing a stable support base for established meetings with their own clear identity, by fostering new ideas and helping to determine the demand for new meetings in the microbiology community, and even to support their initial piloting and development.

Some important awards are newly available in clinical microbiology. A travel award for clinical microbiologists is available (http://www.theasm.org.au/awards/asm-clinical-microbiology-travel-award/) and we are very proud to announce the creation of the first new major award for many decades, the ASM Lyn Gilbert Award, to stand alongside the ASM Frank Fenner Award and the ASM David White Award. Lyn Gilbert is a renowned Australian clinical microbiologist (and previous President of this Society), and this new award is intended to recognise major contributions in any area of diagnostic laboratory microbiology in Australia or internationally by ASM members/Fellows. The inaugural award was made in absentia to David Ellis for his contributions to clinical mycology. We hope to formally present this award for the first time at the ASM in Canberra in 2015.

Another important new initiative is the Nancy Millis mentoring breakfast with visiting speakers and students, lunchtime networking and discussion session and an evening social/mixer. The programme was formally launched with a dinner at the Royal Society attended by members of Nancy’s family, close friends and colleagues and the ASM Executive. We hope to expand this in future meetings, and to include ECR development within this from 2015 on. See some of the ~90 graduate students who attended the Nancy Mills mentoring sessions in Melbourne talk about this at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAdDW7fqCSo.

One of the other very important changes has been to re-energise our role as an advocacy group. The creation of the role of Vice President (Communications) was an important initiative of Paul Young, and the acceptance of this challenge by Jack Wang, from the University of Queensland, has been a boon. We have seen a new website developed with our partners, ASN, and a much stronger presence in what are now standard media formats such as FaceBook (http://www.facebook.com/AustralianSocietyForMicrobiology), Twitter (@AUSSOCMIC), YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/user/AUSSOCMIC) and LinkedIn (http://www.linkedin.com/groups/Australian-Society-Microbiology-6605071). This has led to increasing engagement with membership, particularly among our younger members.

We need to continue to engage and re-engage with the membership and respond to the needs of the microbiology community as a whole. As professional and research microbiology funding contracts, the need for support from the national Society increases. The value of the state branches in education and support of early career microbiologists is greater now than ever, and those who lead these branches work hard in service of the clever country we all aspire to. We urge everyone who reads this to think about what they can do to support their colleagues in this community and to bring fresh ideas to the table at state and national level, where there is great enthusiasm for renewal and for reaching across traditional discipline boundaries. You can support the Society and your colleagues most easily by simply becoming a member.