History of the Balkan Stomatological Society (BaSS)

SUMMARY

Some of the main activities of the Balkan Stomatological Society (BaSS) over a rich 19-year history are presented. These activities have been aimed at improving oral health care provided by the dentists throughout the Balkans, and to establish ties of friendship and collaboration between researchers and clinicians in this region, creating a foundation for mutual understanding and peace. To accomplish these goals, the BaSS annually organizes congresses and publishes a scientific journal, beside many other activities, such as public oral health promotion, bringing into accordance study programmes and curricula, supporting student exchange programmes, etc.

Keywords: Balkan Stomatological Society; Balkan Journal of Dental Medicine

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INFORMATIVE PAPER (IP)

The idea of writing a short history of the Balkan Stomatological Society (BaSS) sprung up at the BaSS Council several years ago. However, no one was ready to undertake such a complex task, although several promises were made. Finally, I decided to try to do that, regardless the fact that I am not a historian; moreover, I am quite inexperienced in the business of writing chronicles or history in general. But, I have been in the BaSS from the very beginning and founding of the Organization, and tightly connected with the BaSS Council activities.

Birth of the Idea to Establish a Society

The Balkan Stomatological Society is a scientific society which aims at improving the standards of dental medicine, and thus improving the health care provided by the dentists to the people of the Balkans. Even more, the aim of founding our Society was to establish ties of friendship and collaboration between scientists and practitioners in this region, creating a base for mutual understanding and peace. This society is a non-governmental and a non-political body, and I believe that it is mainly because of this fact that it is so widely accepted and so much supported by most of the members of our profession in all the Balkan countries. In fact, people of the Balkans, in the span of the centuries, have lived together in this region; therefore, we have developed many common cultural attitudes that bring us together and make understanding each other quite an easy task. Members of this Society believe that there are no problems which can not be solved in a peaceful way.

General international communication is, and has been improving dramatically during the last years. We need to utilize all of the communication opportunities available to consolidate quality improvement, within a peaceful environment, for the benefit of the people we serve as health providers.

We must share knowledge and skills with all our colleagues. One of the most precious cornerstones of our stomatological profession is that knowledge is freely shared among us all. It is to be shared openly through publications, lectures and meetings of all types at the pre- and postgraduate levels. That is why our minds and hearts should be open to share all our knowledge in the interest of better care for patients throughout the Balkans. This would strengthen the entire profession, and confirm the idea by which the BaSS society was guided throughout these years.
Founding of the Organization

The Balkan Stomatological Society (BaSS) was founded at the 1st Balkan Dental Congress in Thessaloniki, Greece, in 1996. The main idea of establishing such an association in the Balkans was to bring specialists from different fields of dental medicine closer together and enable the exchange of personal experiences and observations among professionals throughout the Balkans. Already in the first few years of the Society showed the validity of that idea, providing all the members with many wonderful moments at the congresses in all member countries, and creating prerequisites for further individual contacts. Only a year after the foundation, the BaSS started editing a journal, the Balkan Journal of Stomatology (BJS), which additionally contributed to the main idea of the Society and enabled international publishing of scientific papers of Balkan authors.

But, as in most endeavours, beside success and achievement, there are also losses - the BaSS lost some of its most respected and loved members. At the end of the previous century, we heard the sad news about the death of Prof. Dimitri Iacovidis, the former Secretary General of the BaSS. All who knew him remember his outstanding enthusiasm and efforts in developing our Society, as well as his kindness and sincerity, which helped build and strengthen relations among colleagues throughout the Balkans. And only two weeks later, we lost the honoured professor Joakim Eleftheriadis from the same department of the Dental School of the Aristotle University in Thessaloniki. Exceptional professional qualities and outstanding knowledge of both were highly respected by all colleagues throughout the Balkans, and worldwide. We all miss them tremendously. In 2005 we also lost Prof. Olga Blagojevic, a distinguished member of the BaSS Council, on July 10th, after a fatal car accident on the road from Sarajevo to Foca. She was especially close to the idea of BaSS among Bosnian colleagues. Although her country had not joined the association from the very beginning, she regularly attended its meetings and actively took part in the Council activities from 2001, and she was the first to introduce many of her younger colleagues to the BaSS and other associations and institutions as part of a continuing education process and further improvement. In 2009, during his presidency to the BaSS, we lost Prof. Marko Vulovic, a distinguished member of our Society and one of its founders. His great contribution to the Society was widely acknowledged, especially for establishing the Preventive Dentistry Group of the BaSS shortly after founding the BaSS and for his leadership of the Society at the very end of his life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>BaSS Congress</th>
<th>Place of the Congress</th>
<th>President of the Congress</th>
<th>President of the BaSS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Thessaloniki, Greece</td>
<td>Prof. D. Karakasis</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Belgrade, Yugoslavia</td>
<td>Prof. D. Beloica</td>
<td>Prof. D. Karakasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Sofia, Bulgaria</td>
<td>Prof. N. Atanasov</td>
<td>Prof. D. Karakasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>Istanbul, Turkey</td>
<td>Prof. N. Yazicioglu</td>
<td>Prof. D. Karakasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>Thessaloniki, Greece</td>
<td>Prof. D. Iacovidis</td>
<td>Prof. D. Beloica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>6th</td>
<td>Bucharest, Romania</td>
<td>Prof. A. Iliescu</td>
<td>Prof. D. Beloica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>Kusadasi, Turkey</td>
<td>Prof. N. Arpak</td>
<td>Prof. N. Yazicioglu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>Tirana, Albania</td>
<td>Prof. P. Kongo</td>
<td>Prof. N. Yazicioglu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>9th</td>
<td>Ohrid, FY ROM</td>
<td>Prof. M. Carcev</td>
<td>Prof. N. Atanasov</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>Belgrade, Yugoslavia</td>
<td>Prof. M. Vulovic</td>
<td>Prof. N. Atanasov</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>11th</td>
<td>Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina</td>
<td>Prof. H. Sulejmanagic</td>
<td>Prof. A. Iliescu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>12th</td>
<td>Istanbul, Turkey</td>
<td>Prof. H. Bostanci</td>
<td>Prof. A. Iliescu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>13th</td>
<td>Limassol, Cyprus</td>
<td>Dr. I. Irodotou</td>
<td>Prof. M. Vulovic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>14th</td>
<td>Varna, Bulgaria</td>
<td>Ass. Prof. N. Sharkov</td>
<td>Prof. M. Vulovic (Prof. P. Koidis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>15th</td>
<td>Thessaloniki, Greece</td>
<td>Prof. T. Lambrianidis</td>
<td>Prof. P. Koidis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>16th</td>
<td>Bucharest, Romania</td>
<td>Prof. N.C. Forna</td>
<td>Prof. P. Koidis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>17th</td>
<td>Tirana, Albania</td>
<td>Prof. R. Qafmolla</td>
<td>Prof. H. Bostanci</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>18th</td>
<td>Skopje, FY ROM</td>
<td>Prof. A. Minovska</td>
<td>Prof. H. Bostanci</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>19th</td>
<td>Belgrade, Serbia</td>
<td>Prof. D. Stamenkovic</td>
<td>Ass. Prof. N. Sharkov</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Nine distinguished professors led the Organisation as presidents of the BaSS (see Tab. 1). The first president, and founder of the Organisation, was Prof. Dimitrios Karakasis (president till 1999). It is essential to say that Prof. Karakasis’s merits for the Society were indeed precious, not only for the implementation and success of the idea of bringing the dental professionals at the Balkans together, but also for the status and design of the Society. It is also important that he supported the idea of founding the scientific Journal of the Society from the very beginning, constantly contributing to its scientific level, as well as to its reputation outside the Balkans. At the end of his mandate as president, he was acknowledged for his great contribution to the Society, which continued in various aspects in the years that followed.

**Congress of the BaSS**

Balkan Stomatological Society was founded at the 1st Balkan Dental Congress in Thessaloniki in 1996. The Yugoslav Stomatological Association and the City of Belgrade were the hosts of the 2nd Congress of the Balkan Stomatological Society (already known as BaSS), from the 2nd to 5th of April 1997. The Congress was held in the „Sava Center”, the biggest congress centre in Belgrade. More than 700 participants from almost all Balkan countries attended the Congress. As expected, the dentists from the host country were the most numerous. Beside the participants from Balkan countries, dentists from other European countries, as well as from Asia, presented their papers at the Congress. The participation of our colleagues from Germany, Japan, Austria, Sweden and Great Britain was noticed, and many dentists from former Yugoslavia, living and working in different European countries, also attended. The Scientific Committee succeeded in producing a very interesting Programme with various lectures and symposia presented simultaneously. The Scientific Forum with invited speakers raised exceptional interest. The lectures of the Scientific Forum were divided into five main themes: (1) The Improvement of Oral Health; (2) Contemporary Aesthetic Dentistry; (3) Basic Sciences in Dentistry; (4) Contemporary Treatment Methods; and (5) Surgical Procedures in Dentistry. Many Oral Presentations, Video Sessions, Poster Presentations and Table Clinics were also presented.

The official language of the Congress (as well as of the Balkan Stomatological Society) was English, but most of the presentations were simultaneously interpreted into Serbian. Two General Assemblies of the Balkan Stomatological Society took place during the Congress. The Statute of the Society was approved and the new Council was nominated. Professor D. Karakasis (Greece) was elected President of the BaSS and Professor D. Beloica (former Yugoslavia) was also elected as future president (President Elect). It was decided that the next, the 3rd Congress of the Society would be organized in Sofia (Bulgaria), from April 2-5, 1998, and the following in Turkey in 1999. For the first time, at the 2nd Congress of the BaSS each Congress participant was given (with the congress material) a copy of the 1st number of the Balkan Journal of Stomatology (BJS), an official publication of the Balkan Stomatological Society. The general atmosphere at the Congress was very pleasant and friendly and many new contacts were established, which helped strengthen future cooperation and understanding in the Balkan countries, as well as to improve the oral health of the population.

The first two congresses of the BaSS showed a remarkably high standard of public dental health care and dental science on average in the Balkan region. However, the participation of dentists, other than the faculties’ academic staff, in the Society’s activities was proportionally low, especially of those from the private dental practice. Private dentists from Balkan countries certainly have a lot to discuss on common problems and should exchange experiences, which is why there is a general belief that they will take a more prominent role in the Society’s activities in the future.

One of the most attractive Turkish cities, Istanbul, probably the only city in the World located on 2 continents, was the host of the 4th Congress of the BaSS. The congress was held from 22 to 25 March, 1999 and took place in the European part of Istanbul, at the attractive Congress and Exhibition Center „Lišst Kirdar“, which has excellent conference halls and auxiliary technical facilities. Unfortunately, global politics left an even greater impact on the Congress participants the day before the end of the Congress, when bombing of former Yugoslavia by NATO started. That unbelievable event influenced an outstanding meeting and shocked not only the Yugoslav participants, but others as well, who expressed their sincere wishes to help and offered support in every way. Serbian colleagues will always remember the kindness and sympathy shown by our hosts and other friends from the Balkans.

At the congress in Istanbul, many existing problems in dental medicine were elucidated, and participants of the Congress could find various subjects of interest regarding contemporary dentistry. There were over
30 lectures delivered by eminent experts from all over the World, including the Balkan region. Two round tables dealing with the problem of caries prevention in children were held, presided by Prof. Vulovic from Belgrade. Presentations at the congress reflected a high standard of dental health service and dental medicine research of the Balkans. A great number of posters was also presented (over 400), and that too was an occasion for direct contacts among colleagues from all over the Balkans. One of the main aims of the Congress was exactly that: to enable contacts among experts and provide an occasion for them to meet and exchange professional experience. No doubt this Congress has helped promote further professional cooperation in the region.

After a successful two years mandate held by Prof. Dimitri Karakasis, who was also the founder of the BaSS, in compliance with regulations of the BaSS Bylaws, Prof. Dragan Beloica from Belgrade was elected the new President of the Society. At the same time, Prof. A.N. Yazicioglu from the Ankara University was elected Vice President.

The 6th annual Congress of the BaSS was held in Bucharest, Romania, from May 3rd to 6th. The Congress was attended by over 800 participants from all Balkan countries. In addition to a number of selected lectures of prominent speakers, almost 300 oral presentations and almost 400 posters were presented. During the Congress, a Deans' meeting of several dental faculties from the Balkans was also held. The discussions on various themes were extensive and, among others, the question on unifying of programmes and curricula was raised. The problem of evaluation of the work of faculties was discussed, too. It was concluded that the student exchange programme should be intensified. Also, at the meeting of dental associations, various professional problems were discussed.

The delegates from FYROM, Dr. N. Carcev and Dr M. Gigovski, informed the Council about the next Congress planned to be held in Ohrid in May, 2002. It was decided that the Congress in 2003 would take place in Tirana (Albania), and the Congress in 2004 in Cyprus. Bosnia and Herzegovina with 2 councillors, 1 from each of the existing entities, became a regular member of the BaSS after unanimous voting.

After these early congresses, altogether 19 congresses were held in several cities of the Balkans - Kusadasi (Turkey), Tirana, Ohrid (FYROM), Sarajevo, Limassol (Cyprus), Varna (Bulgaria) etc (see Table 1). All these congresses were opportunities for mutual exchange of experiences regarding contemporary dentistry in the aim of, not only of raising standards of dental health service and dental medicine research, but also to strengthen already created friendship among professionals.

**Publishing the Journal**

It is a strange fact that dentists and scientists in several fields of dental medicine in the Balkan countries, generally speaking, are better acquainted with the achievements in dental science in the rest of the world than in the Balkan region. One of the possible reasons for this is the fact that several languages are spoken in the Balkans. This is why it has been agreed at the Council of the BaSS that English should become the official language of the Balkan dentists, as it is universally accepted for communication among medical professionals. One of the primary goals of the BaSS was to bring specialists from different fields of dental medicine closer together and enable the exchange of personal experience and observations. An official journal of the BaSS, i.e. a professional journal representing all dentists of the Balkan countries, would additionally contribute to that goal and improve the possibility of interchanging opinions and ideas among professionals throughout the Balkans. In my first editorial, published in the very first issue of the BJS, I stressed the strange fact that dentists and scientists in several fields of stomatology in the Balkan countries, generally speaking, are better acquainted with what is going on in the science of dental medicine in the rest of the world than in the Balkan region.

The Editor-in-Chief had always tried to define the content of each issue of the Journal by selecting papers from different Balkan countries with the intention of covering as many dental specialities as possible. This inevitably created a certain imbalance regarding the quality of published papers, but the basic aim of the Journal was, primarily, better communication among Balkan dental professionals, exchange and improvement of knowledge on the whole. By actively contributing their papers, dental professionals from the Balkans consistently supported BaSS' idea and practice to publish a journal for dentists of all Balkan countries.

The first two volumes of the BJS comprised only two issues per year. However, at the beginning, there were so many contributions to the Journal that the BaSS Council decided, in 1999, to increase the number of issues of the Journal per year from 2 to 3, which is a contemporary policy. For scientific journal, several conditions governed this policy, which were carefully examined, especially of financial nature and not only
with the wish to publish the results of scientific research or to present unusual and interesting cases from clinical practice. The fact that the Editorial Board had many interesting papers in the previous 18 years of publication, and was able to choose those which represent different countries and different fields of dental medicine for each issue of the Journal, confirmed that in the Balkans there was and still is a need for a journal like the Balkan Journal of Dental Medicine (previously Balkan Journal of Stomatology).

During its history, two supplements of the Journal were published. The first, published in 1999, was dedicated to the celebration of the 50th anniversary of Belgrade’s Faculty of Dental Medicine (at that time: Faculty of Stomatology). On that occasion, among many events and activities, special attention was paid to the interesting scientific programme, which consisted of outstanding lectures delivered by guest speakers - well-known experts in different fields of dental medicine from all over the World. These lectures were published in the first supplement of the Journal. The significance of publishing these lectures is twofold. First of all, without a doubt, these lectures were worthy to be published and become attainable to a wider group of professionals. But even more, this supplement also contributed to the idea of presenting the Balkan faculties (on this occasion - University of Belgrade). Unfortunately, the BaSS and the Journal thereafter did not continue to present other faculties on similar occasions or events. The second supplement was published in 2005, during the 10th Congress of the BaSS in Belgrade, representing an abstract book of the papers presented during the Congress.

There are probably 3 basic problems that attract attention of many editors of scientific journals: the scientific value of the papers, which is reflected on the average quality of the journal, the coverage of professional interest of the targeted population, i.e. a professional diversity of papers and, finally, the overall dispersion of the journal among potential readers, i.e. the distribution of the journal and its access by readers.

Concerning the scientific quality of the papers accepted for publication, this is primarily a matter of the competent peer review process. As to the official Journal of the BaSS, the situation is somewhat specific: there are several editorial teams, one in each Balkan country, who receive papers and organize peer reviewing, selecting peer reviewers in accordance to their own judgement among local outstanding experts. That is why the Editor-in-Chief does not have the first of the mentioned problems, as he is not involved in the selection and acceptance of papers, which is the duty of the National Editorial Boards (NEBs).

Due to the fact that the Editor-in-Chief receives from the NEBs a lot of papers from different fields of dental medicine, which is a privilege of journals dealing with a relatively wide professional scope, it hasn’t been so difficult to combine papers of various topics for each issue of the Journal, and to cover a wide range of interest; in other words, to prepare a journal as interesting as possible to the whole targeted population (dental professionals in the Balkans).

As such, the first 2 of the 3 cited possible problems did not occur within the scope of duties as Editor-in-Chief of the BJS. But the third, regarding the distribution of the Journal, caused concern not only to the Editor, but also to the BaSS Council. On several occasions it was brought to the BaSS Council’s attention that some authors were unaware that their papers had already been published (as it happened that they had not received the relevant issue of the Journal).

In search of an answer to this problem, one should remember that the BJS, from the very beginning, has been distributed only among members of the BaSS, which is understandable if one takes into account that the BJS is published by the BaSS. But the problem that we confronted in that sense is the fact that the BaSS membership “fluctuates” every year, which creates difficulties not only in the distribution of the Journal, but also when planning the number of each issue to be printed. Solving of this problem was on the agenda of several BaSS Council meetings, unfortunately without a final conclusion. Contemporary views on accessibility to scientific research, however, notably do not permit any borders or limitations such as the Balkans. Therefore, apart from aiming to achieve a higher scientific level, the Journal should be recognized beyond the Balkan borders, i.e. worldwide. Realization of that would begin with its open access publishing and indexing in as many as possible secondary publications. This could be achieved by the end of this year, and would certainly be of interest to all the professionals in the Balkan region and of great help to future editors.

It seems, in general, that the Journal has fulfilled the main concept and aims of its founding - to publish results of scientific efforts and present interesting clinical cases from all parts of the Balkans, to help the exchange of practical experience and communication, to present latest achievements in dental science of the Balkan region, as well as to raise the scientific level of the dental profession among Balkan countries.

Looking back, but also ahead, it is obvious that there is still room for improvement in the process of editing the Journal. Concerning its content, I am happy to say that our initial fears that there will be no interest
among authors throughout the Balkans to publish papers in English in this Journal has been absolutely dispelled. The number of submitted papers, especially from some countries like Turkey or Greece, considerably exceeded the possibility of publishing them all at the same time, so that a waiting list for their publication had to be made. This situation, obviously, enabled the Editor to make good selections among many papers and create interesting issues of the Journal, composed of various kinds of papers and covering different fields of dental medicine.

Although personally satisfied with the way in which the BJS has been published till now, I believe that we have, after so many years, approached the point where further improvement is needed to enhance the recognition of the Journal among dental professionals worldwide, as well as to obtain for publication papers of a higher scientific level. Recognition of a scientific journal is best provided by appropriate indexing, and citation indexing is an important consideration for the editorial and publication processes of a journal, as well as for the journal’s readers and authors. The concept is simple - the value of published information is determined by those who use it, so the quality of a published paper can be assessed by measuring the impact it makes in the community at large.

I realized that this was something I had not anticipated enough at the very beginning because of the main concept of the BJS which, in the aim of presenting dental achievements of professionals throughout the Balkans and various levels of research, inevitably created a certain imbalance in the quality of published papers. However, the basic question that needs to be answered is: how to maintain the fundamental idea and, at the same time, to raise the scientific level of the Journal, enabling its citation indexing and worldwide recognition? Probably, the best solution would be to provide a more rigorous peer reviewing process.

Since 1997, in 18 years of the BJS history, exactly 665 papers were published, representing the state of art and achievements of dental medicine in almost all regions of the Balkans - 30 papers from Albania, 6 from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 15 from Bulgaria, 70 from FYROM, 196 from Greece, 13 from Romania, 70 from Serbia, 262 from Turkey, and 9 from other countries. The last 6 issues of the Journal (beginning with the 2nd issue of the 11th volume) were fully presented on the BaSS web site. However, only a few of those were published after presentation at the BaSS Congresses regardless the enormous number that were submitted on those occasions. If we take into account that each BaSS congress had at least 200 (oral or poster) presentations (which is understated because many of had over 300 to 400), it means that a low percent of previously presented papers is published, probably less than 2.5%.

The above-mentioned data stress a need to comment the obviously expressed phenomenon of under-publishing in this region among dental professionals. It appears that only 2% (approximately) of presentations reported at BaSS congresses were published in scientific journals, and this is far from the generally accepted insufficient percentage of 50%! This phenomenon is absolutely inexplicable and unacceptable and that this policy must be changed in future, at least by publishing in the Balkan Journal of Dental Medicine (BJDM).

Scientific journals are usually classified as international and local - the first group being directed to the wide international audience and usually published in English, and the second group directed toward domestic audience, publishing papers of local researchers and in local language. Certainly, journals of the first group are much more widely accessible and, although it is more difficult for authors to publish in these journals, it is also more desirable, too. The BJS (BJDM) stands somewhere between these 2 groups of journals - it is not strictly local, but it is not, in a global sense, international. I believe that we have now, after almost 20 years, approached the point where we need to go regarding recognition of the Journal among dental professionals worldwide and aim at reaching a better quality, and higher scientific level of published material.

**Other Activities**

The strongest impact of the BaSS presence is that cooperation between dental scientists has intensified, especially between academic staff of the Balkan schools of dental medicine. This cooperation was initiated at the very beginning of the Society’s foundation, and already at the 2nd Congress of the BaSS a meeting of Deans was called, where all the Deans agreed to hold future meetings at each BaSS congress. After initial acquaintance, some issues concerning educational programmes and curriculums were discussed in search of further possibilities of developing cooperation between faculties.

The idea of establishing the Preventive Dentistry Group of the BaSS was brought up by Prof. Marko Vulović from Belgrade at the 2nd Congress of the BaSS. The establishment of this Group was recognized with full support by the BaSS Council, at the Council meeting in Thessaloniki in 1997. The first meeting of the
Preventive Group of BaSS in Belgrade was organized by Prof. Vulović and his associates. Beside the Serbian participants, representatives from Greece, Bulgaria, FYR Macedonia and Romania were also present at the meeting, while representatives from Turkey and Albania, who supported the meeting, were unable to participate. At the meeting, all the participants agreed to promote the establishment of the Preventive Section as a part of the BaSS during the following BaSS Congress. The main goal of the Preventive Section was the improvement of oral health in Balkan countries by fulfilling several tasks: to establish the priorities of the primary prevention of oral diseases; to create the policy of the BaSS in the field of prevention; to motivate members of BaSS to support this policy; to seek support from the ministries of health of Balkan countries for this policy; to improve oral health among the population in the Balkans by motivation through common preventive programmes and activities; to make joint projects on the basis of research, realisation and monitoring of the basic goals of oral health; to improve educational curriculums in the Balkans based on current trends in preventive dentistry. Members of the Initiative Committee of the Preventive Section of the BaSS were appointed as follows: M. Vulović, M. Carević, K. Louloudiadis, N. Sharkov, A. Podariu, M. Mirceva and the representatives from Turkey, Albania and Cyprus.

During the meeting, participants also agreed on the basic organising structure of the Section with several proposals, as follows: members of the Preventive Section must be members of the BaSS; the executive board will be constituted on the basis of one representative from each Balkan country; the president and the president elect will be appointed by the executive board for the period of two years.

Gathering of basic data on the present oral health status in Balkan countries (agreed to be sent by the end of February 1998 to M. Vulović and M. Carević) was the first joint activity made by the group. The presentation of the obtained data would be regarded as support to the idea of establishing the Preventive Section at the 3rd BaSS Congress in Sofia. The Preventive Group ended its meeting in Belgrade with hopes that the proposed foundation of the Preventive Section, with the given goals, will improve oral health throughout the Balkan countries.

At the following meetings of representatives of dental faculties of the Balkans (Deans and Vice Deans), held in Ankara from the 8th to 11th November, 1997 the Balkan Inter-Faculties Committee was constituted, with the main task to prepare a draft of Agreement between dental faculties of the Balkans in the aim of closer mutual cooperation. Members of the Committee (Prof. N. Atanassov, Prof. N. Sayan, Prof. V. Burlui and Prof. D. Stamenkovic) made a commitment to prepare this draft for the next meeting of the Society (in Sofia), expecting that the anticipated cooperation will include a programme of students exchange during holiday time, joint research projects, comparison and coordination of educational programmes etc. The Deans’ meeting in Sofia was expected to encourage these activities and enable better inter-faculties cooperation in the future.

The first 2 congresses of the BaSS had shown a remarkably high standard of public dental health care and dental science on average in the Balkan region. However, the participation of dentists, other than the faculties’ academic staff, in the Society’s activities was proportionally low, especially of those from the private dental practice, although private dentists from Balkan countries should have a lot to discuss on common problems, and exchange experiences from different regions of the Balkans. In the years that followed, their participation in BaSS activities grew, and there is a general belief that they would take a more prominent role in the Society’s activities in the future.

Looking back, one can conclude that the basic goal of the BaSS has been fulfilled only partially. At several BaSS congresses we had the opportunity to learn about scientific achievements in dental medicine of all the BaSS member countries; we could exchange experience and viewpoints on professional matters and clinical cases. Finally, we made a lot of acquaintances and friends. But, have we really got to know anything about the organization of national dental health care services or dental educational systems in the Balkan countries? Although some facts concerning these matters have occasionally been mentioned at some meetings, they were not widely presented.

One of the most interesting initiatives of the Society, which raised a lot of attention, was the endeavour to acquaint representatives of member countries with the different dental study programmes in the Balkan countries, and to solve the question of how to create closer, more compatible dental education processes throughout the Balkans. Moreover, one of the proclaimed aims of the Society, stated in the Constitution of the BaSS, was “to attempt to establish uniform training requirements for the science and to coordinate student exchange” (Article 3).

In the meantime, countries of the European Community, somehow at the same time or, to be honest, slightly earlier, commenced the process of standardisation of European Higher Education Area,
which started in the 90s, now known as “Bologna process” and defined through “Bologna declaration” resulting in several documents created thereafter. It was aimed at essential reforming of universities, which would result in the removal of barriers and development of such a framework of teaching and learning that would enhance mobility, cooperation and awareness of belonging to one common social and cultural space while respecting national diversities. Through all these documents, some basic principles or action lines have stood out: facilitating the readability and comparability of qualifications in order to achieve their international transparency and academic and professional recognition; establishing a system of credits such as ECTS (the European Credit Transfer System), which facilitates student mobility and international curriculum development and represents a key element in the Bologna Process; promoting European cooperation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies; promoting the European dimensions in higher education, especially with regards to curricular development, inter-institutional cooperation, and integrated programmes of study and research.

However, although significant progress in diploma recognition is underway, still considerable efforts are required to ensure a systematic use of the Bologna transparency tools - ECTS and the Diploma Supplement. The European Higher Education Area needs curricula that allow mobility by use of ECTS (60 per year), core curricula that satisfy the established standards and harmonization within Europe. But, harmonization of the educational process in dentistry is still far from being reached, especially in terms of its possible cycling. And especially in the Balkans where we have countries that are in the European Union, countries in the process of becoming EU members, as well as those still waiting to be accepted, with rather diverse university interests and different dental education curricula. We all know the saying: “All roads lead to Rome”; perhaps not all, but surely more than one road leads to Bologna. However, the road to Bologna is a long and winding one, full with crossroads and, probably, with dead-ends. How far have we gone with dental education in the Balkans, and which road to choose? Deans and representatives from several dental faculties have discussed the possible harmonization and standardisation of dental education, for the first time in Ankara in the late 90s, and at several BaSS congresses thereafter. I believe this issue needs to be discussed further, at future BaSS reunions, now in the light of new tendencies in Europe.

This brief review is only a personal view of the situation, and I would like to stress that I am not an expert in these matters. However, I hope that future meetings dedicated to these topics, will elucidate the situation in each respective country more precisely and in more detail. All information that will help us get to know each other better will be welcome.

One of the main goals of the BaSS - better mutual understanding and communication among dental practitioners and scientists of Balkan countries - has already been achieved through exchange of experience and knowledge at the Balkan congresses and several national congresses held in the Balkans. However, there are many more activities that could be carried out under the auspices of the BaSS, and others will arise in the future. Contacts between dental faculties throughout the Balkans are scarce and should improve. There are probably many reasons for this, but the following are evident.

First of all, as mandates of some Deans (members of the BaSS Council) are rather short, the newly elected Deans are not always well acquainted with the Society's activities. Another problem is that some Faculty officials, due to the fact that they can't all be members of the Council, seem rather uninterested in the development of the BaSS. This could be overcome by better communication and an increased exchange of information - primarily from BaSS Councillors to other colleagues and faculty staff, but also vice versa, to be open to suggestions and interest of those not present at meetings.

Therefore, having made the first steps in the previous century, we should step further in the 21st century by ensuring better communication, exchange of information, results and know-how. One of the BaSS objectives could be creation of a network of universities and professional associations in the area of dental medicine on a regional level, which could later be integrated into corresponding world networks; although one shouldn’t forget that the BaSS is an association of individuals and not of institutions or societies, but these are composed of individuals, are they not?

In Conclusion

As can be seen from this short, but successful history of the BaSS, we have accomplished many of the
planned activities from a regional point of view. With a strong foundation already laid, I believe it is now time for closer scientific cooperation and production of joint projects, such as exchange of students, teaching staff etc. Concerning the official Journal of the BaSS, the Balkan Journal of Dental Medicine, the first planned activity is to enable open access publishing, which would considerably contribute to its better visibility among researchers and clinicians and, consequently, wider citation of the published papers.

Finally, I must stress that this paper is only an attempt to present a part of the BaSS history and records of events I personally attended. Inevitably that something important might have been omitted! I hope that, in the future, some new facts on the history of the BaSS will be reported by more than one member of the BaSS, as many of the founders are still active in the Society.

References

Several editorials, may own and guest editorials, published previously in the BJS, were used to prepare this report.

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