The American Society for Clinical Pathology: The Pathology Society of “Firsts”

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Although the American Society for Clinical Pathology (ASCP) is recognized as the preeminent organization for continuing education in pathology and laboratory medicine, and although the independent certification agency (ie, the Board of Registry) of the ASCP is recognized as the preeminent certification agency of nonphysician laboratory professionals, it is not generally appreciated or recognized that the ASCP is also the organization that has been responsible for the introduction and innovation of numerous “firsts” in pathology and laboratory medicine. The examples which follow are but a small sample of the significant role that the ASCP has played in the evolution and maturation of pathology and laboratory medicine as a distinct specialty of medicine.

The Beginning: The First “Clinical” Pathology Organization

In the early 1920s, “clinical pathology” was an infant science barely recognized by physicians. Clinical pathology was generally practiced by internists as an adjunct to their patient practices. These practitioners strongly believed in the potential of medical laboratory testing to enhance diagnosis, and these clinicians began to band together in various states, particularly in Texas and Colorado.

(It is important to note how the meaning of the term “clinical pathology” has evolved from its origins. Originally applied to clinicians who also practiced laboratory medicine, it is now commonly applied to that branch of pathology associated with the [non-anatomic] branch of the laboratory. When it was originally applied to pathology, it encompassed the whole of pathology, not simply one branch.)

These practitioners carved a small niche at the American Medical Association (AMA) but were not pleased with the minor recognition they received from the AMA. These “clinical pathologists” (defined as physicians who performed anatomic or laboratory testing in the due course of taking care of their patients) believed the only way to gain the acknowledgment and recognition they needed was to develop a national organization.

Ward Burdick, MD, who later became the Society’s first Secretary-Treasurer, was a major catalyst for a national group. He and others initiated a letter-writing campaign, soliciting the support of pathologists around the country and inviting them to meet as part of the 1922 AMA meeting in St. Louis, MO.

On May 22, 1922, at the Missouri Baptist Sanitarium, a group of 39 physicians met to develop what would be named the American Society of Clinical Pathologists. Their goal was to “achieve greater scientific proficiency in clinical pathology, and to maintain the status of clinical pathologists on an equal plane with other specialists.” A constitution and bylaws were drafted overnight. More than 100 physicians attended the second meeting on May 23. Eventually, 145 charter members joined the Society.

Phillip Hillkowitz, MD, became the ASCP’s first President, William MacCarty, MD, became the first Vice President, and Herbert Brown, MD, became the first Second Vice President. State counselors were appointed throughout the country. The first ASCP offices were housed in Dr. Burdick’s Denver laboratory where he served the Society until his death in 1928.
The ASCP was incorporated in the State of Illinois in 1922 as a not-for-profit medical society organized exclusively for educational, scientific, and charitable purposes. The focus to serve public purposes established the ASCP as a 501(c)(3) tax status organization, and while this tax status allows the ASCP to engage in limited legislative activity, it prohibits the ASCP from engaging in such overt political activities as supporting political candidates or forming political action committees. The Society’s prime objectives, which were set forth in its constitution and have not changed substantively since the beginning, include:

- to promote the practice of scientific medicine through a wider application of clinical-laboratory methods to the diagnosis of disease;
- to stimulate original research in all branches of clinical laboratory work;
- to establish from time to time uniform standards for the performance of various laboratory examinations;
- to elevate the scientific and professional status of those specializing in this branch of medicine; and
- to encourage a closer cooperation between the practitioner and the clinical pathologist.

The ASCP was the first professional medical organization to articulate such objectives.

The Legacy: A Chronological Litany of Firsts

1928: The Board of Registry (BOR): The first certification agency for laboratory personnel. Recognizing that the quality of laboratory test results (and the impact that these test results have on patient care) depend not only on the clinical pathologist, but also on the training and qualifications of the person directly performing the test, the ASCP was the first professional medical organization to set standards for laboratory professionals. Initially, those standards were minimal, requiring only that the individual be recommended by a member of the Society, then registered with the Society (hence, the Board of Registry). Soon, however, the BOR began to develop relevant standards and procedures and, in 1933, to assess the competence of laboratory personnel. Individuals who could meet the academic and clinical prerequisites, and who could achieve acceptable performance levels on examinations, were awarded “certification.” Certificates were then registered with the BOR. Upon request, the BOR would attest to the certification of its registrants. Board of Registry certification thus became the benchmark of excellence, and the standard that employers of laboratory professionals use to this day. More than 400,000 certificates have been issued since 1933. Board of Registry certificants comprise the majority of the American laboratory workforce. (In retrospect, the Board of Registry should then be more aptly called the Board of Certification.)

1931: The ASCP publishes the first compilation of standardized laboratory techniques (Approved Methods in Laboratory Technique, edited by John Kolmer, MD).
The ASCP publishes the first medical journal dedicated to laboratory medicine (the American Journal of Clinical Pathology).

1933: The ASCP develops the first “Tumor Seminar” (which is presented for the first time at the 1934 fall meeting). The Tumor Seminar eventually becomes the annual ASCP “Anatomic Pathology Slide Seminar.”

The ASCP helps establish the Tumor Registry in Washington, DC.

1934: The ASCP is responsible for the creation of the American Board of Pathology. While the ASCP’s Board of Registry set the standards for certification of laboratory technical staff, such standards did not exist for pathologists so the ASCP established a committee to investigate the establishment of an “American Board of Pathology” (ABP). The ABP (as organized by ASCP pathologists in cooperation with the AMA) was approved in 1936 (the same year as the American Board of Internal Medicine) by the American Board of Medical Specialties (established in 1933) to offer certification in anatomic and clinical pathology.

1936: The BOR publishes the first Curriculum for Schools of Medical Technology and is the first organization to designate its registrants as “medical technologists.” The Curriculum is the first document to set educational content standards for the training of medical technologists (MTs).

1943: Emma S. Moss, MD, from Charity Hospital and the LSU School of Medicine, New Orleans, conducts the first continuing education program specifically directed for medical technologists (a refresher course in parasitology) at the ASCP meeting in Chicago.

1946: The ASCP is responsible for the creation of the College of American Pathologists (CAP). As the post-war economic recovery emerges, the ASCP realizes that unless it changes its constitution and articles of incorporation, because it is organized exclusively for educational, scientific, and charitable purposes, it is limited in its ability to deal with economic matters, professional relations, and federal and state legislative issues. An issue in 1946 of particular concern is state laboratories usurping the work of hospital laboratories. Rather than change its constitution, the ASCP
helps create the College of American Pathologists (CAP). The CAP is specifically incorporated to deal with economic matters, professional relations, and federal and state legislative issues. The CAP is organized not as a charitable organization to serve public purposes, but is organized to serve the business purposes of its members. The CAP is established as a 501(c)(6) tax status organization allowing no limit on its legislative or political activities. To provide a fiscal foundation for the CAP, the ASCP gives the laboratory standardization program to the CAP (which becomes the CAP Proficiency Testing survey program). Frank Hartman, MD, ASCP President from 1928 to 1929, becomes the first CAP President. Most practicing pathologists join as members of both the ASCP and the CAP.

1947: The ASCP and CAP hold their first joint annual meeting. This is the 25th annual meeting for the ASCP and the first for the CAP.

1948: The BOR is the first medical certification agency to implement true/false and multiple-choice questions to allow machine grading of its exams.

1949: The ASCP establishes the Board of Schools and publishes the Essentials of an Acceptable MT School.

1951: The ASCP initiates its first Round Table Symposia.

1953: The ASCP, CAP, and the American Society of Medical Technologists (ASMT) organize the National Committee for Careers in Medical Technology (the first coalition to address laboratory staff shortages).

1955: The ASCP elects its first woman President. Emma S. Moss, MD, becomes the first woman President of the ASCP and the first woman President of any national medical organization. Dr. Moss recommends the formation of a Commission on Continuing Education (CCE). The ASCP Board approves the formation of the CCE.

1956: The ASCP presents the first continuing education programs at its spring meeting in St. Louis, MO. Coye C. Mason, MD, becomes the first CCE Commissioner.

1960: The ASCP and the ASMT co-sponsor the first regional workshops for directors of medical technology schools.
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>The ASCP is the first pathology organization to create Associate and Affiliate member categories to be inclusive of the nonphysician members of the Society.</td>
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<td>1971</td>
<td>The ASCP is the first to develop and introduce a Self Assessment Program for pathologists.</td>
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<td>1972</td>
<td>The ASCP BOR becomes the first organization to establish the baccalaureate degree as the minimum requirement for MT certification.</td>
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<td>1973</td>
<td>The ASCP Board of Schools becomes autonomous as the National Accrediting Agency for Clinical Laboratory Sciences (NAACLS).</td>
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<td>1977</td>
<td>The ASCP is the lead sponsor and organizer for National Medical Laboratory Week.</td>
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<td>1980</td>
<td>The ASCP is the first organization to introduce a self assessment tool for medical technologists (Tech Sample).</td>
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<td>1983</td>
<td>The ASCP is the first pathology and laboratory medicine organization to present audio teleconferences for continuing medical education (CME) credit. The ASCP is the first pathology organization to develop and implement an assessment tool for pathology residents (the Resident In-Service Exam [RISE]).</td>
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<td>1985</td>
<td>The ASCP is the first organization to develop guidelines for the approval of continuing medical laboratory education (CMLE) programs.</td>
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<td>1986</td>
<td>The ASCP is the first pathology organization to establish a Resident Physician Section.</td>
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<td>1992</td>
<td>The ASCP awards the first annual $1,000 ASCP Scholarships to 50 medical laboratory students. The ASCP is the first pathology organization to add a medical technologist to its Board of Directors. The ASCP BOR is the first medical certification organization to implement an advanced psychometric “computer adaptive testing” methodology for its certification exams.</td>
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<td>1995</td>
<td>ASCP BOR-certified medical technologists are proclaimed by the National Labor Relations Board as...</td>
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“professional employees” for the purposes of collective bargaining.

2004: The ASCP is the first pathology organization to co-brand a Web site with Medscape/WebMD (www.pathology.medscape.com).

The ASCP receives a grant ($1.5 million) from the federal government to provide educational support for laboratory testing in Africa as part of the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR).

2005: The ASCP BOR is the first agency to provide certification exams for laboratory professionals in Korea.

The ASCP Resident In-Service Exam is administered in Australia.

2007: The ASCP BOR is the first laboratory certification agency to be granted accreditation by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI).

After All These Firsts. . . Now the Last Word

Since its founding in 1922, the ASCP has been the leader in pathology and laboratory medicine. Its influence has extended throughout the evolution and maturation of this specialty of medicine. The ASCP is unique among pathology organizations in that its inclusive membership brings both pathologists and nonphysician laboratory professionals together for the advancement of the specialty. The ASCP has never strayed from its founding goal to “achieve greater scientific proficiency in clinical pathology, and to maintain the status of clinical pathologists on an equal plane with other specialists.” In 2007, just as in 1922, “clinical pathologists” are “clinician” specialists whose medical practice encompasses the whole of pathology (both anatomic pathology and laboratory medicine). The ASCP has never strayed from the prime objectives set forth in its constitution.

Through the ASCP’s educational courses, through the BOR’s certification activities, and through the ASCP’s influence to found the ABP, the CAP, and the NAACLS, the ASCP has shown the way and led the way for the advancement of the specialty. The ASCP was, is, and will be an organization of “firsts.” Its membership expects no less.