

Ratko Magjarević – Secretary General 2003-2009



It was 2003 when I was elected IFMBE Secretary General at the General Assembly in Sydney. A long journey to Down Under, for me from Zagreb, Croatia, two flights, one to Kuala Lumpur lasting 14 hours, and then another lasting additional 11 hours to reach Australia. It was a long journey for the majority of participants of the World Congress (WC) in Medical Physics and Biomedical Engineering, 2003. When the WC site was selected, the representatives of the IFMBE affiliated societies did not know how threatened the event will be. In March 2003, the outbreak of an unusual illness in South Eastern Asia, later called sudden acute respiratory syndrome or SARS, urged many governments to recommend or ever forbid their citizens to travel, especially to far destinations. Though the alert was abolished before the beginning of the Congress, it

still affected the number of participants and caused many gray hairs to grow on the heads of the WC organizers. Despite the limitations, more than 2.500 participants managed to attend the Congress and the biomedical community was well represented through the scientific presentations and in all bodies of the Federation that met in Sydney Convention Centre.

Before the World Congress 2003, I was already engaged in the Federation as the Editor of the IFMBE News, the magazine of the Federation which was published bi-monthly at the IFMBE web page. I was also asked to help preparing the organization of IFMBE events including the World Congress in Sydney. The dot-com bubble from late nineties already hit most of the members of the BME community and the Congress participants wanted to be connected to the news, to their job and family, read regularly their e-mails... But there was no wireless technology for large number of Internet users at that time, at least not at a reasonable prize. We recognized another opportunity for the Federation to serve its membership by offering free access to Internet and to organize a gathering venue for the members: we hired a booth at the exhibition space, placed into the booth some IFMBE promotional material, primarily on the Federation's Journal *Medical and Biological Engineering and Computing* (MBEC), a table and a few chairs for *ad hoc* short meetings and consultations, and as the most important, a computer with Internet connection. That made the booth a busy place and a meeting point. While the participants were waiting for their turn to connect to the Internet, many of them established international contacts, made appointments and concluded agreements for further collaboration. I can still remember Alan Murray, the Editor in Chief of our journal, *Medical and Biological Engineering and Computing*, standing in the booth and carrying on endless discussions with potential authors and educating young colleagues on how to write a proper scientific paper in BME.

During the Congress, the IFMBE held its regular meeting of the General Assembly which includes elections for the IFMBE Officers and ordinary members of the IFMBE Administrative Council. I was nominated for the office of the Secretary General and I got elected. Of course, I was very happy and honored to have been elected and given such a large responsibility, but at that time I did not realize how much work that office meant and what kind of engagement, including a large number of working hours such a voluntary position in an international association of the size of IFMBE implied. There were two aspects of the increased workload: the first and more important was the need to follow numerous new activities of the IFMBE President, Prof. Joachim Nagel, who took over the office of the IFMBE President during the IFMBE General Assembly, held at the World Congress in Sydney. Prof. Nagel had a plan how to improve the services to the IFMBE membership and the BME Community at large, and Joachim also had an enormous amount of energy which he invested into expansion of the IFMBE activities. Most of those activities remained built into the platform of activities of the Federation after his term of office was over. In this short chapter, reflecting my memories on the period I was serving as Federation's Secretary General, I will not enumerate all activities and achievements of the Federation, since they are covered by the addresses of the Presidents who held the office at that time. I will try to bring my memories, in an anecdotal way, and I hope many of you will be able to refresh your memories and experiences from that period.

Going back to the main track of this presentation, let me speak of the activities of my office. The second cause of increased activities was wide acceptance of Internet for communication and information spreading. The Internet had an enormous impact on communications already since the mid-1990s, but from my experience, the use of electronic mail became a standard in official communications in the IFMBE community about the time when activities for preparing of the World Congress in Sydney began. That also gave a tremendous potential for promotion of the events, but also meant a new organization of the business of the IFMBE secretariat. I use to joke with one of former IFMBE Secretaries in this matter: he actually complained that he was not getting all the information he wanted to get from the secretary general. I reminded him that at the time of his term of office, when the communication between the representatives was by regular mail, he had to prepare and send a letter to the representatives of affiliated societies in spring, in summer he was collecting the feedback, in autumn analyzing the replies and in winter he was informing the Societies on the results of the correspondence. From the early days of my serving as secretary general, the number of received electronic messages was only steadily increasing.

I was very lucky that early after I started serving in the SG office, I was able to hire Ms. Nikolina Volf to help me with the work in the SG Office. Ms. Volf was finishing her studies of English and Italian languages at the University of Zagreb when she started working for IFMBE. Very soon after Nikolina started preparing the regular correspondence for the IFMBE, one of the Committee Chairs reported that my English improved! Nikolina stayed with the IFMBE for more than five years and she was a tremendous help. Belonging to the new "digital" generation, she was supporting me during my travel, by exchange of e-mails or by Skype voice or chat, no matter how large the time difference was between Zagreb and the place where I went to. We are still in touch and Nikolina often advises me or organizers of IFMBE sponsored conferences on how to use EasyChair, the free conference upload and review software recommended for IFMBE conferences.

In order to reduce the pressure to the communication channel to/from the SG Office, we have decided to maximize the use of the IFMBE web pages for informing the membership on actions and events related to the Federation. The structure of the web page and the page designer we were using at that time was from early days of Internet as media, but for a number of years we were able to use it very efficiently due to its simplicity. Those web pages were created by my predecessor, Dr. Heikki Teriö, and were managed by a Swedish company. During my first term of office as SG, the IFMBE AC decided to contract the services of a permanent office to our affiliate from UK, Institute of Physics and Engineering in Medicine (IPEM). One of the items in the contract was a re-design of the Federation's web pages, which brought the Federation a much more professional and also eye catching design. Unfortunately, the updating of the information was not so easy as earlier and in some cases, there was a substantial delay in publishing of some information.

From those matters that effected the Federation the most in those six years, I would like to point out switching to a new publisher for Federation's journal. The choice of the new publisher was not an easy task and in negotiations with publishers, Prof. Nagel managed to achieve a large number of privileges for IFMBE individual members. The new publisher, Springer, offered publication of the journal on-line and printed, on paper. The on-line option of MBEC, available from the beginning of 2006, made the journal more attractive for authors and increasing of number of pages per issue as well as publishing the issues on monthly basis proved to be a correct decision. The fact that each member of any IFMBE affiliated society could access on-line and read MBEC free of charge made our journal more visible, more read, more cited. It was and it stayed a success story! On the other hand, Springer made available free of charge to IFMBE members another three peer reviewed journals in biomedical engineering from its production.

Publishing of all publications of the Federation has been entrusted to Springer, and the covers of the Journal, the IFMBE Proceedings and books in the IFMBE book series got a new attractive look, a new brand, such as you can enjoy when taking this Anniversary book into your hands. The IFMBE Proceedings Series was initiated in 2001 and the first Proceedings in the series were those of MEDICON 2001 held in Pula, Croatia. With this first edition, the standards were set and accepted by Springer when they became our publisher. All IFMBE Proceedings since 2006 are published electronically, so that conference participants get them on digital media, and the on-line version has been made available to IFMBE members under the same conditions as MBEC. The IFMBE Proceedings Series was soon entered into bibliographic databases like WoS ISI Proceedings, Scopus and others. The reputation and stability of the publication means a lot for all those young scientists whose first publication is in conference proceedings.

IFMBE News was one of the publications I was editing for a long time. From a few pages printed from time to time, it grew into a nice bi-monthly publication. There were really nice contributions in the Newsletter, like my favorite, the interviews with Mr. Keith Copeland, legendary IFMBE treasurer and with Prof. Robert Nerem, one of the IFMBE Presidents, both of them prepared by Dr. Monika Nagel.

One of the initiatives that I was especially bound to is introduction of Young Investigators Competition (YIC) to IFMBE sponsored conferences including the World Congresses. An organization like IFMBE, which activities are volunteer based, has to

attract the new generation of leaders in the field of biomedical engineering to its activities in an early stage of their careers. In the competition, all young investigators who want to take part in the competition send their papers to a special Awards Committee of the conference, consisting of distinguished researchers from the region. After reviewing the papers, the Committee decides on a limited number of YIC finalists, who then present their contributions (oral presentations or posters) in front of Committee members. They make the evaluation of the presentations and decide on best papers. Diplomas are then presented to the all finalists and the awards the winners of the competition at the closing ceremony. Though I was more a backstage person in most of those selections, I can remember so many happy faces that became red after hearing their names during the winner announcement.

While writing these lines, memories just pop up, and I do have to stop writing at a point. After six years in the office, I was tired from regular workload the SG office brought me, but I had a feeling that those two generations of IFMBE Officers and Administrative Council members have succeeded in strengthening and modernizing the Federation. Most of these achievements wouldn't be possible without numerous contributions of biomedical engineers and other colleagues from all over the world. I am very happy that my work for the Federation gave me opportunities to meet so many people dedicated to biomedical engineering and so many nice persons taking care for the benefit of health and wellbeing.

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Respectfully submitted,
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