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The Southern African Society for Plant Pathology: 1962–2020

Scientific societies play an enormously valuable role in promoting important disciplines. This role is perhaps even greater in countries that are relatively isolated from the rest of the world, such as those in the southern hemisphere, with no long histories of scientific endeavour nor well-established networks of communication. In this regard, scientific societies in South Africa are crucially important; in our view, their value is often under-appreciated. This might also be true for the Southern African Society for Plant Pathology (SASPP), which has drawn together and coordinated the activities of plant pathologists for almost 60 years. In so doing, the SASPP has contributed substantially to the health of plants that sustain agriculture and forestry and food security, and those that constitute one of the most biodiverse and fascinating flora on earth, the Cape Floristic Region.

Reflecting on the history of the SASPP in 2020, the United Nations International Year of Plant Health, is timely and relevant. The Society, then named the South African Society of Plant Pathology and Microbiology (SASPPM), was initially established by a small group of five plant pathologists and microbiologists in 1962. At that time, the fields of plant pathology and microbiology were deeply integrated. This integration stems from the fact that plant diseases are primarily, but not exclusively, caused by microbes such as fungi, bacteria and viruses. Consequently, microbiologists working on plant diseases or microbes that enhance plant growth, operated at the confluence of classical microbiology (dominated by bacteriologists and virologists with interests in animal health and industrial microbiology) and that more closely focused on the biology of plant pathogens and the control of plant diseases. The fact that most plant diseases are caused by fungi and that relatively few microbiologists worked on these organisms, must even in the early days, have warned of potential conflicts of interest amongst the first members of the Society.

Despite complications relating to the boundaries of plant pathology and microbiology, the SASPPM was effectively established and held successful annual meetings (symposia, later termed congresses) commencing in Pretoria in the latter half of 1962. These annual congresses moved between the then four provinces of South Africa, although on one occasion, in 1973, the meeting was held in Salisbury (now Harare), Zimbabwe.

As time passed, the boundaries between microbiology (at least in the classical sense) and plant pathology became increasingly problematic for the SASPPM. This is not surprising given the fact that the two disciplines were growing rapidly in the country and there was a clear difference in the interests between microbiologists working on animal and human diseases, water purity, and industrial processes involving microbes, and those focused specifically on the health of plants. This is illustrated by the fact that from 1962 to 1969, most presentations concerned plant pathogens, whereas from 1970 onwards, presentations on microbiological topics began to dominate congresses. From 1975, presentations at congresses were separated and devoted either to microbiology or plant pathology. This is known to have been difficult for those microbiologists with dual interests and loyalties spanning the two distinct but overlapping disciplines. Arguments ensued as to whether the words 'plant pathology' were fairly positioned in front of 'microbiology' in the name of the society, which was dominated by microbiologists with little or no interest in plant diseases.

As tensions rose between members of the SASPPM, it became increasingly clear that the focus of the Society required substantial change. Thus, at the 1980 meeting held in Bloemfontein, a decision was made by the classical microbiologists to separate from the plant pathologists. They would then establish a new society to become known as the South African Society of Microbiology (SASM). Microbiology was removed from the name of the plant pathology society, thereafter known as the South African Society for Plant Pathology (SASPP).

The split was formally reported to have been congenial. But some current (now older) members of the SASPP remember being shocked by the high level of animosity and anger amongst some senior plant pathologists, who were clearly upset by the changes. The fact that many university departments incorporated both microbiology and plant pathology resulted, at least in some cases, in rifts in relationships between academic colleagues. It is interesting to reflect that, even today, complications relating to the intersections between plant pathology and microbiology persist in some domains.

The SASPP, now separated from SASM, was a much smaller group than had been the case prior to 1981. Some plant pathologists despaired of the split and even felt that there were insufficient members to maintain a viable society. This sentiment was rapidly shown not to be relevant as the SASPP grew in membership, in relevance and in vibrance. Successful congresses were held annually and a decision was made in 1994 to expand the geographical scope of the society to include countries in southern Africa. This led to changing the name of the Society to the Southern African Society for Plant Pathology, still the SASPP.

Congresses and other meetings have always played an important role in the history of SASPP. In a large country where plant pathologists are commonly separated by great distances, these gatherings provided opportunities for colleagues to meet, to exchange knowledge and to establish important collaborations. As is true for all scientific societies, they have also provided the platform for students to meet, to draw mentorship and support from those more experienced than themselves, as well as to establish their own career paths. Consequently, the proposal in 2006 and the final decision the following year for the Society to meet formally only every second year, was deeply debated and not necessarily accepted enthusiastically by all members.

The most relevant argument to hold SASPP congresses only every second year, was that it would afford members the opportunity to attend congresses of other societies relevant to them in the intervening years. In retrospect, this



change to less frequent meetings has not affected society membership or attendance at the now biennial congresses. Looking back, the first congress of the SASPP in 1981 – after the split from the microbiologists – was attended by approximately 100 members. At the time of the last meeting of the Society held at Club Mykonos in the Western Cape in 2019, there were just over 300 members, not substantially different to the prior congress in 2017. Clearly, and contrary to the predictions of some members including one of the authors of this narrative, holding meetings every second year has not had a negative impact on the SASPP. This is possibly due, at least in part, to the fact that tools for communication linked to the Internet and social networking have negated the need for more regular in-person meetings.

All scientific societies and related organisations have the important role of recognising the accomplishments of their members. The SASPP appreciated this fact in 1978 when it established its highest honour, the Christiaan Hendrik Persoon Gold Medal. The medal was named for Christiaan Hendrik Persoon (1761–1836), one of the “fathers” of mycology (the study of fungi) who was born in Cape Town. The globally recognised epidemiologist, JE Vanderplank, was the first recipient of the Medal in 1979. Many years were to pass before another South African plant pathologist, Professor WFO Marasas, was considered worthy of receiving this high honour in 1987. Professor Marasas was at that time employed by the Medical Research Council, and later in his career

held extraordinary professorships at both the University of Pretoria and Stellenbosch University. The Medal has now been awarded six times over a period of 33 years and in 2015 was awarded for the first time to a female plant pathologist, Professor Brenda Wingfield (University of Pretoria). In addition to the Christiaan Hendrik Persoon Gold Medal, the SASPP has established many awards and honours that play an important role in promoting excellence and activities across the broad range of areas that constitute the field of plant pathology.

While the fact that plants suffer from diseases is well known, the field of plant pathology as a discipline is poorly known or understood amongst the general public. This is a situation that requires active attention, especially given the importance of plant health and consequently the tremendous threat of pathogens to food and fibre security, clean water availability and the quality of the air that we breath. New and novel plant pathogens that threaten humankind are arising regularly and this trend is set to continue. The currently experienced global health pandemic caused by the novel SARS-CoV-2 virus vividly illustrates the terrible impact that pathogens can have on humanity. Plant pathogens are equally threatening and deserve far more attention than they currently attract. The SASPP, with its long and proud history, has an important role to play in addressing this important goal. And the International Year of Plant Health is providing many opportunities to promote the importance of plant pathology in southern Africa, as well as globally.