From volcano clouds to iLivers: EASL growing in times of change

Heiner Wedemeyer
EASL Secretary General*

Klinik für Gastroenterologie, Hepatologie und Endokrinologie – Medizinische Hochschule Hannover, Carl-Neuberg Str. 1, 30625 Hannover, Germany

Dear Members and Friends,

2010 was an amazing and extremely successful year for the European Association for the Study of the Liver. Hereby, I want to express my deepest gratitude to everyone who participated and supported EASL in conferences and Schools of Hepatology, was involved in organizing events, represented EASL in political meetings in Brussels and elsewhere, gave us feedback to further improve the society, and, most importantly, who joined EASL as a new member. I am very happy to announce that the number of EASL members almost doubled in the last 18 months. By the end of 2010, EASL will have close to 3000 members and very importantly, many young fellows have joined the society in 2010.

In the summer of 2009, the EASL Governing Board had to make a difficult decision: The Congress Venue in Nice – which was selected by our professional congress organizer several years ago – was simply too small to host the International Liver Congress™ (ILC), a meeting with almost 8000 participants. EASL membership had grown so rapidly that the initial venue selected could no longer host our congress of 8000 participants! We were thus faced with a challenging question: “What should we do?”, knowing full well that finding an adequate venue just ten months before the congress was a challenging task. Moreover, “What would be the financial consequences for our society?”, bearing in mind that the revenue from the ILC represents the main income for EASL, enabling us to run additional educational activities including Schools of Hepatology and Monothematic Conferences. In the end, we were very lucky that the brand new Vienna Messe Center was still available. The ILC in Vienna became an outstanding success both in terms of scientific discussion and financial consequences: even though we had to move the meeting, EASL did not face a financial loss (as expected) but made an even higher profit!

In Vienna, we were initially very happy that the meeting was well attended and that all sessions were running smoothly. However, we will all remember the 2010 ILC as the “Volcano-Meeting”. Suddenly and unexpectedly, several European airports had to close as the ash cloud from the Eyjafjallajökull volcano in Iceland covered half of the continent. The Vienna Airport closed Friday night. Luckily, most of the speakers had arrived on time but several unexpected problems had still to be solved in a short time frame. For instance and quite unfortunately, Jürg Tschopp from Lausanne could not come to Vienna to give his basic State-of-the-Art lecture on Saturday, undoubtedly one of the key highlights of the ILC. The EASL Governing Board was, therefore, extremely pleased that Markus Heim accepted to replace Jürg Tschopp just 16 h before the talk! Markus: it is simply very rewarding to have such a good friend; you really helped to save the meeting! I cannot emphasize enough our gratitude.

As the meeting went on and came to a close, all attendees faced the same question: “How and when do we get home?” Almost 2500 non-European participants were “trapped” in Vienna, cars and busses for rent were unavailable within few hours, and train tickets became a highly valuable commodity. It quickly became clear to us that we had to help our international guests and support young fellows as much as possible, in the “spirit of EASL”: the special way we treat our guests. At the end, everybody got home and luckily the airports opened just 1–2 days after the meeting. Nevertheless, there are numerous stories to tell and every participant is invited to submit her/his story to the EASL website: some colleagues had already booked a room on the “Queen Mary” leaving Southampton four days after the meeting to get back to North America; other friends took a car from Vienna to Istanbul catching a flight from there to Tel Aviv to finally get a plane to the USA; and many of us will remember rather long bus or train rides, reminding us of how big Europe really is...

EASL was extremely lucky that the ash cloud only arrived on April 16 and not just two days earlier. It is hard to imagine what would have happened if we would have had to cancel the entire meeting... From this unexpected event, an important lesson was learnt: extraordinary situations out of human control can always occur. Since scientific/medical organizations are fragile, the EASL Governing Board carefully evaluated the consequences of such events for our association. Do we have sufficient insurance for such disasters? Do contracts with sponsors and meeting organizers consider these special circumstances? In fact, we have now made sure that our activities can continue for at least two years even in the event of the cancelation of a major meeting for unexpected reasons. In this respect, I can tell you that EASL’s finances are safe and that with Mauro Bernardi from Bologna, we have an extremely committed and careful treasurer.

“The liver” in Europe is represented by EASL. We are and must remain the primary voice on all liver diseases including complications of end-stage liver disease, viral hepatitis, fatty liver disease,
liver transplantation, and hepatocellular carcinoma. I am convinced that hepatologists can only benefit from a strong European liver society. Our experience over the last years has taught us that the enormous importance of acute and chronic liver diseases is rarely recognized by politicians. Therefore, we have expanded our lobbying activities in Brussels and Strasbourg and have spent a huge amount of money in order to be visible at the European level. Jean-Michel Pawlotsky started this initiative a few years ago and asked Dominique Valla to coordinate our EU-activities. Dominique officially joined the EASL Governing Board in April 2010 when the EASL business meeting approved a change of our constitution introducing the new position of an EU-Policy Councillor. I consider this another major step for our society in the process of becoming more professional and ensuring efficient political activity for the liver in Europe. In this respect, Dominique Valla and Mark Thursz, the EASL vice secretary who has been appointed by the Governing Board to support the EU-Policy Councillor, have been very successful during the last 12 months. EASL is now a member of several European forums on chronic diseases and cancers. After several years, we are proud to say that EASL is very well known in Brussels and is frequently referred to as the premier European liver organization. Importantly, efforts are beginning to pay off: several research consortia on liver diseases have been funded within FP7 in 2009 and 2010. Examples include the FLIP group on fatty liver disease chaired by Vlad Ratziu, two grants on biomarkers in acute hepatitis C, and another special European grant on hepatocellular carcinoma coordinated by Josep Llovet. We are continuing our efforts so that liver-related research topics will also be part of the FP8 program and we ask our members for their continued support in these activities.

EASL was also very active in further strengthening our relationships with other international liver associations. In March 2010, we signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Asian Pacific Association for the Study of the Liver. In June, we organized, for the first time, an EASL-day during the Chinese liver meeting. EASL also hosted the Global Liver Summit and had two extremely productive days discussing common initiatives with AASLD and the Latin American Liver Association (ALEH). EASL was present during the ALEH meeting in August and will continue to collaborate with Latin America on various levels. For example, we will extend the exchange of young fellows as ALEH is sending two fellows to each EASL clinical School of Hepatology. I hereby also want to acknowledge the enthusiasm of the 2010 and 2011 AASLD presidents Arun Sanyal and Jake Liang in cooperating with EASL to fight together for the liver on a global level.

EASL is the European liver society and every hepatologist is invited to become a member. Nevertheless, it is important to remind ourselves that EASL is not a federation of national associations. Thus, until now there had been no official forum of interaction between EASL and national liver societies. The Governing Board has therefore decided to collaborate more closely with national associations as we feel that there is the not only the need to coordinate activities and to support specific countries, but also to use local knowledge and experience for pan-European activities. We have invited representatives from national associations to present themselves during the 2010 International Liver Congress™ and hope that even more countries will be present in 2011 in Berlin. Obviously, the importance of EASL is quite different for every country. We hope to better understand how we can assist you in your work and your expectations from us. The new Governing Board members Daniele Prati and George Papatheodoridis are responsible for the relationships with national associations. Both are extremely committed to this topic. Therefore, feel free to contact Daniele and George if you have ideas or specific requests.

As EASL grows, an imperative is to become more professional and to share the workload. In January 2009, EASL started its office with only three employees. Now, just two years later, Gregoire Pavillon is heading a team of nine people paid by EASL and working for you in Geneva including the central office of the Journal of Hepatology. The EASL Governing Board is extremely thankful for the support of the office. The entire team is extremely committed and it is really great fun to work with you: thank you very much Gregoire, Laetitia, Jacqui, Emilie, Sarah and Kathy as well as Sonia, Adam and Simon! The decision to establish a central permanent office for the Journal of Hepatology proved to be effective. The Governing Board acknowledges the commitments made by the Journal Editors Didier Samuel, Chris Day, and Peter Galle to handle this new situation. The performance and progress of the Journal is amazing and the Board will obviously support this development as much as possible.

Another highlight of the year is undoubtedly the release of the EASL history book: “Past and Present”. The history of EASL is no longer lost. Roger Williams took the initiative and spent an enormous amount of time to collect very special stories starting from the very first EASL meeting in Marburg, Roger and the entire family of contributors: thank you very much!! The book is outstanding and we really appreciate your efforts. Every member who has not yet requested a book should simply contact the office and we will be happy to send you your personal “Past and Present” book.

Speaking of history, what will be the future direction of EASL? Scientific meetings are still important and I am convinced that no virtual platform will ever substitute the need for face-to-face discussions of latest scientific results. Thus, our annual meetings, our special conferences, and our monothematic conferences will remain key events in the annual calendar of a hepatologist during the next decade. However, we have to move forward and in addition to the ongoing activities we may need to be more present in the new world of the web-2.0. For example, if we need to establish an EASL forum within Facebook, should we further expand our already very successful webcast program, and do we need to show our congress presentations on Youtube, etc.? The Governing Board is well aware of the growing importance of these new tools and has therefore decided to move forward to further expand our e-activities and educational tools. We are convinced that this will be one important way to attract young and young-minded hepatologists. The newest EASL e-activity is the development of the “iLiver” application: an educational tool on liver diseases developed for iPhone and iPad. This application will allow medical experts to access EASL approved medical information at the patient’s bedside in order to facilitate treatment of chronic liver diseases. EASL shall appoint an Editorial Team for this initiative to work alongside a designated Medical Coordinator and technical team to ensure that this tool is released in 2011. In fact, when you attend the International Liver Congress™ in Berlin in March, you will be able to discover this new tool first hand!

The EASL Governing Board wishes you a successful year in 2011. Let us further develop the special EASL spirit. We hope to see you all in Berlin for the International Liver Congress™ 2011.