

Report on the 53rd American Association for Laboratory Animal Science Meeting

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'The Meeting of the Americas'. San Antonio Conference Center, San Antonio, Texas, USA.

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This impressive title appears annually within the various journals of our industry and for me had always conjured-up visions of far-flung American locations attended I had presumed by like-minded animal technologist professionals who maybe had alternative perspectives on how we should approach research (using animal models) for the advancement of our fundamental medical knowledge.

For someone who has to date only been able to attend our own IAT Congress on an irregular basis, the chance of being able to make it to the highly regarded AALAS Meeting was remote. I should therefore like very much to thank the Cambridge Branch of the IAT for putting me forward to IAT Council and for their selection and also to Dr Craig Frisk, now Past President of AALAS who in turn chose my application out of the submissions he received from other laboratory animal professional education bodies of Europe, a very great honour when you consider the past winners of this prestigious award.

This is how as recipient of the 2002 B & K Universal Group Limited International Travel Fellowship Prize sponsored by Professor Gerry Bantin of B&K Universal Limited I came to travel to San Antonio, Texas to attend the 53rd AALAS Meeting. An extra-special event this year as the meeting was entitled 'The Meeting of the Americas' and there were sizeable delegations present from the majority of the South American countries as well as representatives from most countries around the world including New Zealand and Australia.

There were quite a number of British attendees but as the total delegate number was in excess of 4,000 plus those attending on a daily basis and those engaged with the enormous trade exhibition, it was hard to spot any face twice let alone someone you actually knew!

There may only have been a small percentage of British delegates but we seemingly influenced the weather and Texas suffered severe gales and floods again, mainly in the south. San Antonio fortunately escaped these but instead was very cloudy with warm rain! Just to make us Brits feel at home there was a noisy street demonstration with many people and placards but this time not against research but against the deterioration of relations between America and Iraq.

Delegate registration started from 2.00 pm on the Saturday and to cope with the numbers there were approximately 20 people engaged in the various aspects of this mammoth exercise. Attached to one's name badge (which also served as a swipe-card with all your information on it for easy use within the Trade Exhibition), you were also given different coloured ribbons to attach which indicated whether you were a 'First Timer' and also if you were an 'International Delegate' for instance. This was a nice touch. A handy canvas shoulder bag with the programme in both long and pocket-sized editions plus some freebies was provided by the multiple event sponsors. The bag became a necessity with the amount of literature available within the Exhibition Hall. Despite the size of the event my name was immediately recognised and introductions made.

AALAS had their own shop/info centre within the foyer area and I picked-up lots of useful literature about their organisation and activities. There was definitely an air of excitement about as this is obviously a highly regarded event and a great deal of reinforcing of established friendships was going on.

The Jose B Gonzalez Conference Centre in San Antonio is a truly massive facility with multiple rooms of varying size so that there can be many different seminars, symposia, round table discussions etc. going on

concurrently. It also featured the 'Lila Cockrell Lecture Theatre' (a past major of San Antonio), certainly the largest auditorium I have ever seen. It was just as well it was so enormous as the Opening General Session saw it packed-out, predominantly (and strangely) with people dressed as cowboys and cowgirls! I thought it a very good idea that AALAS holds its award ceremony at the Opening General Session so that as Dr Frisk says, you have the opportunity to meet the award winners and congratulate them during the course of the Meeting. A brief précis of each winner's career and achievements to date was read-out and the prize awarded.

All the international visitors were also asked to stand so they could be applauded, as were the organising committee of AALAS and the Local Events Co-ordinating Committee who had put a distinct 'Texas' theme to everything, especially with their great hospitality.

The guest speaker was a unique gentleman – Dr James 'Red' Duke, who is a local trauma surgeon who one would easily mistake at first glance for another 'cowboy'. His enigmatic style of presentation was in sharp contrast to his obvious skills within the operating theatre. He is also quite the TV celebratory and we got to see excerpts from some of his recent programmes. The Texan accent did at times have me somewhat baffled, but he can certainly make and take a joke!

The Texan theme certainly was re-emphasised next when to the delight of everyone present three of the local 'Catalena Cowgirls' made a spectacular entrance onto the stage complete with their 'Paint' horses! First out carried the AALAS flag to loud applause, the second rider carried the Texas 'Lone Star' flag – to even louder applause – but the final horse and rider received a standing ovation as they carried the 'Stars & Stripes' flag.

The horses coped with the noise really very well considering their usual arena is the rodeo-ring.

Finally a young girl sang the American National Anthem unaccompanied, again to deafening applause - quite a spectacle all round and an indication of the pride taken by American citizens in the United States and in their local Texan culture.

As the horses headed off the stage the 'Local Arrangements Co-ordinator' detailed the evening's forthcoming events and suddenly the presence of the cowboys and girls became apparent as together with two delegations of drummers from the local military academy they were to lead the entire delegation out of the Conference Center, across a four-lane highway, through the Riverwalk Hotel foyer, out across another four-lane highway, into the foyer of the River Center Hotel and up to the biggest room I have ever seen! This was the venue for the evening's entertainment – a Mexican Mariachi Band and some good Tex-Mex food, finger-buffet style.

The formal opening of the Exhibition Hall was held at 8.30 am on the Monday morning and a considerable crowd had gathered. A brief reconnaissance revealed that to comprehensively cover the entire hall could become virtually a full-time job in itself, as it contained some 230+ trade stands! Some of these came replete with fully-functioning cage-washers and bottle-washing robotics, others merely displaying a selection of their wares and then the 'welfare' organisations with their assorted literature. It was pleasing to note that a few stands had items of 'Environmental Enrichment' as their mainstay products and they certainly were attracting a lot of attention (mainly from the technicians it seemed). I got the impression that the Americans may be somewhat behind us in the routine provision of these items for the rodent species within the laboratory context.

I had spent considerable time pondering how I was to fit in all that I wanted to see but basically it just could not be done as there were so many concurrent seminars taking place.

We are presently engaged at the MRC's Laboratory of Molecular Biology in Cambridge in design entities for a major new facility for GM rodents (or 'GEM' rodents as they seem to be known in the States) hence I had decided to concentrate for the greater part on anything that might increase my knowledge-base in this myriad field, so I quickly hurried off across acres of carpet to locate the venue for the first of my selected seminars entitled 'Laboratory Animal Transport: Success Factors'.

I next attended a seminar on 'Integrating IVC's & Automated Water Systems into the BMS'. One thing that is very different from the IAT Congress is that many of the presentations are actually given by

company employees so that one is always concerned about how much of a 'sales pitch' it potentially is. It is all done quite subtly but I think it pays to be a little cynical about the information you are receiving.

A formal 'International Attendees' Meeting' was held at 6.00 pm on the Monday evening and although not very well attended it was good to feel so genuinely welcomed to the Meeting and to Texas. The presentation was held, as were a number of the seminars, in the dual languages of English and Spanish.

Tuesday was sunny and warm at last and in complete contrast to the entire Conference Center which seemed to have its air-con set at 'freeze' so people sat in coats and cuddled beakers of hot coffee! On this day I chose to attend 'Genetically Engineered Mice (G.E.M's) and Infectious Diseases: Research Benefits & Complications' followed by 'Employee Recognition Programs'. The latter I had considerable interest in as retention of staff is always an issue within the academic arena and I hoped to hear some bright and inspiring ideas – which indeed I did - but predictably the vast majority of them were underpinned by substantial sums of money!

Following this was 'Outreach Training for Laboratory Animal Science Personnel' and this was a truly outstanding presentation by John D Young and Beverley A Shelton whose enthusiasm and determination to get our positive message over to members of the public and school children in particular was infectious, inspiring and professional.

The evening began with the Lab Products Inc. sponsored Reception. A small mouse-pin was given to everyone attending and a Mexican Band and spectacular dancers entertained us and then roamed the acreage of the reception ballroom. Again, comprehensive food was provided including BBQ and chilli although just as the evening seemed to be getting fully underway at 8.30 pm prompt it all closed down and everyone left for dinner!

Wednesday was again sunny but it was back into the ice-box (aka the Conference Center) for me for another full day of 'Facility Planning and Design – Basic Concepts' which was my first exposure to the Baylor College GEM Facility as the seminar was presented by the architects responsible for this facility's design. Another quick look around the Exhibition Hall and then off to the 'International Luncheon', a very smart affair where all foreign visitors were invited and welcomed again to AALAS. Sadly I had to eat and run as I had already signed-up to a workshop (which had to be paid for in addition to the delegate fee –thanks B&K Universal!) and could not linger to meet more people. It would have been nice to have had this opportunity to make new friends (and see some old ones) earlier-on in the week as attending AALAS without colleagues can be a rather lonely affair.

The workshop entitled 'Animal Facility Design and Technology' was presented by three architects from the firm Flad Associates where an even more in-depth knowledge of the concepts and design behind the Baylor College GEM Facility was acquired during the four hour workshop!

The early evening began with the AALAS Foundation Reception sponsored by Harlan Inc where we were all welcomed once again by Dr Craig Frisk. During this I met with some familiar faces who decided in that archetypal British way that only an 'Indian' meal would suffice – a decision that saw us commandeering two taxis for a very extensive circumnavigation of San Antonio (the US's 9th largest city) to a restaurant complete with belly-dancers! Thanks for your company chaps!

Thursday's attendance was markedly reduced in numbers but I went along to a seminar entitled 'Protect Yourself: Occupational Health in the Laboratory Animal Setting' which covered everything from the risks of zoonoses through to preventing injury and protection against LAA, to chemical exposure and finally (and of particular interest to me) a presentation from Dr John Craig, a physiotherapist working at the JAX Labs on Ergonomics and Repetitive Motion Injuries, the latter of which can become a major problem for staff primarily engaged in the routine husbandry tasks associated with animal welfare and husbandry provision. Dr Craig had a lot of interesting information on this subject and some seemingly simple but effective answers to the problems like 'Job Rotation' and Group Stretch Breaks' every couple of hours! Primarily the idea was for staff to identify the problem and to suggest feasible ideas themselves on how to get around the difficulty. I envisage this field becoming ever-more important within our

industry as more and more staff work within restricted species range thus increasing the likelihood of RSI-type injuries (and some choosing then to seek litigation in response to it).

The final session of AALAS for me was the round table session entitled 'What Drinking Water Quality is Necessary for the Vivarium?' This engendered considerable debate about what were the existing 'norms' and this appeared to vary considerably on the nature of the company/institution, whether they worked to FDA standards, what the local water quality was (e.g. algae bloom in the Summer months) etc.

So next time you attend IAT Congress and moan about your inability to cram everything in, just remember that a quick tot-up of the total number of sessions, seminars, round table presentations and workshops held at AALAS this year came to 102 with 230 trade stands, an extensive poster display, technical trade presentations, interactive learning/ resources center, the job placement center, the Technician Fun-Fair, the I could go on and on!

Should you ever get a chance to attend AALAS (maybe next year when its venue is Seattle) grab it! It's an experience that will leave you feeling exhausted, fulfilled, stimulated and sometimes puzzled by what you have seen and heard but certainly convinced that there is a huge and thriving community of laboratory animal technology professionals over the pond in America!

Thank you once again to Professor Gerry Bantin of B&K Universal Limited for sponsoring me to attend the 53rd AALAS Meeting, in San Antonio, Texas and to Carole Watson for all the requisite organisation.