European Society for Dermatological Research (ESDR): Shifting Scope and Expanding Boundaries, Promoting Cutaneous Biology Research across Europe and beyond

For nearly 50 years, the European Society for Dermatological Research (ESDR) has made great efforts in supporting its members to advance research in cutaneous biology and related subjects, thereby improving our ability to maintain or restore normal structure and function of skin, i.e. skin health.

Until World War II, North American dermatologists often depended on training in European dermatology departments (Burgdorf and Bickers, 2013). American researchers with European training were among those who founded the Society for Investigative Dermatology (SID) in the 1930s. In the meantime, it had become common for European investigators to seek additional research training in the United States and other countries. European dermatologists with research training abroad founded the ESDR. A group of three, Michel Prunieras (France), Sam Shuster (UK) and Klaus Wolff (Austria) met in the 1960s to discuss starting a forum for scientific exchange related to dermatology in Europe.

Klaus Wolff summarizes how the SID was a role model: “The foundation of the SID marked an attempt to break the chains of pure morphology that had already started to stifle dermatology. It had ventured into the realm of experimentation and kindled interest in a field, which was then terra incognita and is now called cutaneous biology”. The ESDR was founded to fill a gap in existing dermatology meetings in Europe, which at the time were “clinical and driven by status and seniority — where age of brain counted more than its content”. In contrast, the ESDR, according to Sam Shuster, was meant to form a “science base that would encourage youth and its ideas”. Being aware of its roots, the ESDR board recently re-addressed and newly outlined its vision and values (Fig. 1).

The ESDR is inclusive in that it is open to anyone involved in research on skin, hair, nails and sexually transmitted diseases, be it academic investigators (clinicians and/or basic scientists), researchers from industry or members of patient organizations. Important relationships between these groups have been fostered by the ESDR, for example through interactions in drug discovery and translational medicine initiatives, and through entrepreneurial and clinically oriented symposia (Xu et al., 2016). The ESDR meeting has also been hosting an Eastern European research symposium for several years with the purpose of embracing and supporting researchers from countries with less expenditure on research and development. An early goal of the ESDR was to attract investigators from outside dermatology. In fact, the first ESDR meetings were linked to a more general biomedical research conference, a practice that has not been maintained. Nevertheless, many guest speakers are still selected from outside dermatology. Accordingly, research presented at ESDR meetings comes from diverse interests, not only dermatology, because inclusivity creates opportunities and opens new avenues for discovery. As Marion Sulzberger, one of the founders of the SID and first editor of this Journal, stated, there are many “inspirations and stimuli which dermatology offers for fundamental investigations” (Sulzberger, 1951). Cutaneous biology research today is often basic, but it can be translational and ever more dependent on a multi-disciplinary team approach (Uitto and Rodeck, 2012).

An important goal for the ESDR is scientific excellence. Initially, the review system for ESDR annual meetings was extremely strict and “there was an iron rule that only material could be presented that had never been published or presented before”. Thus, excellence was linked
with innovation by ensuring that data presented at the ESDR were hot off the bench. Currently, activities of the ESDR to promote discovery and innovation are not limited to organizing meetings. For example, the ESDR is developing programs and alliances that facilitate and accelerate innovation in dermatology research (Xu et al., 2016) by strongly linking the talent and scientific know-how of academic dermatology with the translational and financial capabilities of industry (Moy and Antunes, 2013). The ESDR is forming relationships with industry, scientific foundations and philanthropy to enable cutting edge scientific investigations.

It is indispensable for scientific progress that people communicate and share knowledge and that new investigators are recruited and mentored (Hartman et al., 2016). Collegiality awards are provided to young investigators to combine attendance of an ESDR, Japanese Society for Investigative Dermatology (JSID) or SID annual meeting with a visit to an academic dermatology department in the respective region (McGrath, 2011, Piguet et al., 2011). In collaboration with the European Academy of Dermatology and Venereology (EADV), the EADV-ESDR summer research courses have been organized since 2010 to introduce early career members to dermatologic research. The ESDR Academy for Future Leaders in Dermatology (FLA) is directed at fostering young researchers by bringing together established leaders in their field with the brightest young scientists, with an emphasis on learning about career paths, experiencing personal interactions and networking (Enk et al., 2012). A network of ESDR future leaders alumni is forming since the inceptions of the FLA in 2011, which in turn is able to provide mentoring to the next generation of outstanding researchers.

As a further step, the ESDR is now planning to offer formal teaching courses for mentors. An ongoing project intends to renew the ESDR’s organizational structure and to create an ESDR charter. This will transform the ESDR from a top-down organization to one that empowers its member base to take active roles in broadening the Society’s scope.

With the advent of unprecedented telecommunications capabilities, the possibilities for scientific exchange and progress are evolving rapidly. Thus, the ESDR has identified a need for leading the way in taking full advantage of telecommunication services. Highlighting original work by using electronic poster walks, social media, mobile messaging and online platforms will only be the beginning. The Society strives to be an early adopter of new technology for communicating scientific and educational materials.

By re-addressing its vision and values and by taking the strategic directions outlined above, the ESDR is well prepared to celebrate its upcoming 50th anniversary in 2020 in the Netherlands where the ESDR was established (Fig. 2).

Naturally, being based in Europe, the ESDR is international. It was founded when research in dermatology was mostly presented and discussed using the local language on a regional/national basis. The ESDR, from its inception, had to
transverse national boundaries, act as a supra-national organization and use a common language. The diversity of Europe provides an enriching and stimulating basis for scientific cross-fertilization.

The trend of internationalization has resulted in the SID, JSID and ESDR sharing their visions and jointly organizing quinquennial meetings since the 1980s, known currently as International Investigative Dermatology (IID) meetings (Holubar, 1990). More recently, the newly founded International Societies for Investigative Dermatology (ISID) has begun to plan its first global meeting in 2023. These meetings increasingly will include additional scientific societies holding free communications-driven research meetings about cutaneous biology (Amagai et al., 2014). Thus, the traditional sister societies SID, JSID and ESDR are expanding to form a worldwide forum dedicated to research in cutaneous biology and related subjects. With all the competitiveness of science, forming the ISID will provide a sense of collegiality within the global dermatology research community.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors state no conflict of interest.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT
We thank Thomas Florestan for helpful suggestions and for providing images for Figure 2.

Matthias Schmuth1*, Michel Gilliet1, Christopher E.M. Griffiths1 and Jonathan N. Barker1
1European Society for Dermatological Research (ESDR)

REFERENCES


*Correspondence: Matthias Schmuth, Dermatology, Medical University Innsbruck, Anichstr 35, 6020 Innsbruck, Austria. E-mail: matthias.schmuth@i-med.ac.at