The Creation of the Canadian Connective Tissue Conference (CCTC): Twenty Years on

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Background When I arrived in Canada in 1977 to establish and direct the Joint Diseases Laboratory at the Shriners Hospital, McGill University, I came from a strong background in connective tissue research in Britain. Originally, in the 1960s, we had national *Collagen*, *Mucopolysaccharide* and the *Bone and Tooth* interest groups that each met regularly and separately. Eventually, the first two groups merged to form the British Society for Matrix Biology. This was and continues to be a very important society as it provides a common meeting ground for students and scientists interested in connective tissue research where progress is shared and collaborations are forged and new training and job opportunities explored.

But on arrival in Canada there was very little research in this fundamentally important area. Tony Melchers MRC group in periodontal physiology, that included Jaro Sodek, based in Toronto, was the only group of its kind at that time. There were researchers working on small soft tissue proteoglycans, in Edmonton, Alberta, namely Paul Scott and Carl Pearson; C.P Leblond and his colleagues at McGill who had contributed so much to our understanding of connective tissues and developmental biology, their work inspiring us all. Michel van der Rest was working on collagen in the adjacent Genetics Laboratory at the Shriners Hospital. Dick Cruess, chair of orthopaedics at McGill and Chief Surgeon at Shriners Hospital, who had invited me to start a group at the Shriners Hospital, and his colleague Nelson Mitchell, both based at the Royal Victoria Hospital, were involved in research on joint tissues. They were excellent early role models for the surgeon/scientist. A number of arthritis researchers were scattered across Canada, mainly with interests in inflammatory arthritis. Connective tissues were never mentioned.

Following my arrival, my contacts were mainly with Tony Melcher's group and laboratories in the USA where there already existed a very strong community of outstanding connective tissue researchers, especially those working on cartilage. These included Larry Rosenberg in New York, who gave up orthopaedics to pursue his passion-research on proteoglycans, and Vince Hascall at NIH (proteoglycans) and David Howell and Fred Woessner in Miami (proteases and proteoglycans). Meanwhile Peter Roughley (proteoglycans), John Mort and Anneliese Recklies (proteases) and Elaine Golds (inflammation/cytokines) had joined me in Montreal.

Interest in connective tissues had grown progressively in Toronto, with Ken Pritzker working on osteoarthritis, the arrival of Marc Gryn timer (bone) from Boston and Rita Kandel (cartilage). Meanwhile, in the early 1980s, Cy Frank, a young orthopaedic surgeon, also with a passion for research, had established a research program in Calgary that would involve orthopaedics, rheumatology, cartilage, tendon, ligament, proteases and bioengineering. By the beginning of the 1990s, Canada had many connective researchers. But they rarely met. Our main meetings were south of the border, such as the Orthopaedic Research Society, or in Europe. There were no opportunities for Canadian scientists and young researchers to meet on a regular basis, and for trainees to seek guidance and explore further training and job opportunities in Canada. I knew of many young researchers moving to the states, often never to return, often because of the lack of a Canadian meeting place.

Creation of CCTC Creation of an annual meeting was something that required urgent attention. So one evening, in an informal meeting in Toronto with Ken Pritzker, Marc Gryn timer, Jaro Sodek and others, I floated the idea of an annual connective tissue meeting that would be built around our trainees. They would be the main presenters and help chair the meeting. Their supervisors would be also present, but the

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trainees would be our priority. At the time, and even now, I know of no such meeting built around our future investigators. The idea was warmly supported and I agreed to host the first meeting at McGill in 1994.

Together with my secretary, I sought out funding from a variety of sources, sent out a call for abstracts to all who might be interested, and with the many submitted papers put a two day meeting together in McGill's Institute of Neurology's amphitheater. There was limited room for posters but as they were where we had our refreshments during the breaks they had plenty of attention. We had about 70 attendees. Students stayed in the low cost McGill residence close by and I was one of the few scientists that joined them. The accommodation was too basic I guess for our friends from out of town that included mainly Kingston, London, Quebec City and Toronto.

After the first day we had our first conference dinner in the rather austere students' dining room whilst many out-of-towners sampled the many culinary delights of Montreal that we couldn't afford on our limited budget. But the meeting was a great success. What a wealth of young research talent was exposed.

At our first business meeting at the end of the conference, we all agreed that the meeting had to continue. The majority felt that we should not create a society but stick to an annual conference that, each year, would be held in another city in eastern Canada. This restriction was entirely due to the limited travel funds available. So in the following years we met in Toronto, Montreal, Kingston, London, Ottawa and Quebec City. Once we tried Calgary, but attendance from eastern Canada was, as we had anticipated, restricted.

Since then, most of the meetings have alternated between Toronto and Montreal. That has worked really well. Funding for the annual conference has increased considerably as we established our credentials and identified different supporters, both national and local. Each year a different pair of scientists in the host city organize the meeting, with different focus areas, and create a social component that is always different and enjoyable. From the outset, we invited scientists, role models for the trainees, to speak at the conference, both part of the scientific sessions and often at the conference dinner.

The value of CCTC I am absolutely delighted and very proud to see how CCTC has grown and flourished through the years. This was only possible through the commitment of many scientists and trainees who have given much of their time to make this possible. The standards of the talks rose considerably in the first few years as standards were established.

Having recently attended the 2014 meeting in London, I continue to be extremely impressed by the excellence of the presentations and discussions, and the exciting data that is presented on a wide variety of topics. What really impresses me is how much of the research is now directly involved in reaching a better understanding of a medical problem. In the early days, there was often a significant gap between the research and the application of the new knowledge it generates. That gap has narrowed considerably, no doubt as a result of changes in research funding priorities. Because connective tissues are present throughout the human body and are involved in so many different diseases, together we can enjoy a meeting that crosses many boundaries and exposes us to a broad spectrum of pathology and physiology that most other meetings never address. We can learn from one disease and apply that knowledge and technology to others, thereby broadening our understanding and ability to treat pathology. It takes our trainees out of their research silos and makes them more receptive and understanding of other conditions, all sharing a common denominator—connective tissues.

We can all be proud to say that we have together created and maintained something very special here in Canada that is already 20 years young. As Canadians, we can be exceedingly proud of our trainees, both medical, masters and doctoral students and post-doctoral fellows and residents.

By bringing together many Canadian scientists each year, many new contacts have been established and collaborations created. This base was of great importance when Tony Cruz, Jeff Dixon, John Esdaile and I got together in 1997/98 to create the Canadian Arthritis Network (CAN), a National Centre of Excellence (NCE). It was funded for the full term of 14 years, major funding concluding in 2012. Because of the CCTC, we became aware of others whose research in other areas could help us better understand arthritis. Their recruitment to CAN greatly facilitated our ability to create a new innovative and integrated basic and clinical research and training program that was only one of 3 NCEs funded, from 73 initial applications, and was the first disease-based NCE to be funded for the full term, following competitive renewal.

So thank you to the organizers of the 2014 CCTC meeting in London, Ontario for kindly inviting me to be with you at your excellent and most stimulating meeting, for the wonderful murine skeleton created with a 3D printer (a skeleton that will not sit in my cupboard), and to share some memories with you. And I salute you all, my many fellow connective tissue researchers in Canada and countless trainees, throughout the years, who together established Canada as a leader in this fundamental and far reaching field of research.