The British Lymphology Society (BLS) came into being 25 years ago as the British Lymphology Interest Group and has now grown into a dynamic and growing organisation with a clear strategic focus, excellent governance processes and an increasing number of active and enthusiastic members. Along the way, the BLS has had to deal with a changing NHS and learn to pursue its objectives in an entirely different environment. This article celebrates the upcoming Silver Jubilee Conference by looking at the background of the BLS and how it grew from an interest group into a thriving society.

The expressed aims of BLIG were to:

- Promote interest and coordinate a strategy for improving the management of lymphatic conditions, particularly lymphostatic disorders (lymphoedema)
- Alert the medical profession to the extent of the problem and patient requirements
- Provide information and advice on care and effective therapy to doctors, physiotherapists, nurses and patient support groups
- Develop a register of treatment centres
- Encourage research programmes that improve investigative techniques and treatment schedules.

It is notable that the BLS established a broad international influence right from the outset.

A year after its formation, the BLIG held its first conference and annual general meeting, again in Oxford. This was a one-day event, unlike the three-day conferences BLS has held in recent years. It was organised by Peter Mortimer and Terence Ryan, and the conference secretaries were Caroline Badger and Christine Cherry. The keynote papers that day were ‘Problems of physical therapy for lymphostatic disorders’ presented by Professor Földi; ‘Historical review of British lymphology: perspectives and role of surgery’ presented by Mr J Edwards; and ‘Problems of lymph stasis in Britain: investigation and medical treatment’ by Peter Mortimer.

It is notable that with its invitation to Professor Földi from Germany, the BLIG/BLS had established a broad international influence right from the outset.

Moving forward to 1995, we again find the BLIG, now formally renamed as the BLS, back in Oxford for an annual conference and AGM. The picture below features many of those whose commitment and enthusiasm was beginning to take the society forward and turn it into the strategically-focused organisation we know today.

The BLS has derived much of its strength from close working links with pharmaceutical companies, which has

Figure 1. Annual conference and AGM of the BLS in Oxford in 1995.
enabled members to keep abreast of product developments. The companies have also played a crucial role in providing the funding, which has enabled BLS to pursue its charitable objectives.

The very first BLIG conference in 1986 was supported by one company, ZYMA (UK) Ltd. By contrast, this year’s Silver Jubilee conference will be supported by no fewer than 19 BLS corporate members. Over the years, however, there are eight companies whose long-term commitment to the BLS has been notable and greatly appreciated by the trustees:

- Activa
- BSN
- Credenhill
- Haddenham Healthcare
- Huntleigh
- Juzo
- MediUK
- Sigvaris.

Conference has always been the highlight of the BLS year; brightening up the shortening days in the run up to Christmas. Every year the same two clear elements emerge:

- Knowledge gained from high-quality presentations from a range of speakers
- Social networking opportunities provided by the event.

It would be impossible to list every single speaker who has contributed to the quality and success of BLS conferences over the years, but a few names such as Professors Mortimer, Pleug, Földi, Leduc, Moffatt, Ryan, Eliska, Kasserolet, Brorsan and Papendiek stand out. Others such as Judith Casley-Smith, Neil Piller, Vaughan Keeley, Dr Manocaran and Alex Munnoch have also made important contributions. Space prevents me from listing the many other equally illustrious speakers who have helped make the conference the success it is today.

These speakers represent the international flavour that has always been a key feature of BLS conferences. Members are always keen to learn about developments and issues confronting overseas colleagues, and in the past the BLS has heard contributions from as far afield as India, Australia, Argentina and the US, as well as from Germany, Sweden and the Czech Republic.

This year is no different and the Silver Jubilee conference will see two keynote speakers from the US, Andrea Cheville and Kathryn Schmitz. Andrea is based at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester and is Associate Professor of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation. She is a graduate of Harvard Medical School and completed her training at the Kessler Rehabilitation Institute and Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Centre. Before her current appointment she founded and directed the lymphoedema service and cancer rehabilitation programme at the University of Pennsylvania. She will be presenting a paper entitled ‘Lymphoedema: is it reasonable to hope for a cure?’

Kathryn Schmitz has published 76 peer-reviewed scientific papers and as Associate Professor at the University of Pennsylvania has led multiple trials, including a recently completed randomised controlled trial (RCT) assessing the safety of upper body exercise among 295 breast cancer survivors with and without lymphoedema. The title of her presentation is ‘Physical activity, obesity and lymphoedema: evidence and opportunities’.

The social networking aspects of BLS conferences have already been mentioned and every BLS member will have their own conference highlight from the past 25 years. Two events have received repeated mentions — being greeted early in the morning by a body lying on grass outside the hotel in Birmingham; and the ‘horse race night’ at Doncaster, which brings back fond memories to many members.

Looking back over the past 25 years has anything changed? If you compare the aims of BLIG with the current BLS objectives, some may say that little progress has been made. The same issues of awareness and funding still need to be resolved and the medical profession still needs more information on the extent of the problem and patients’ requirements.

However, the nature of the NHS itself has changed fundamentally and the BLS is having to pursue its objectives in an entirely different environment. The society has become a dynamic organisation with a clear strategic focus, excellent governance processes and an increasing number of active and enthusiastic members. The growth of the regional representatives network demonstrates the way in which the BLS has remained grounded in the work of its local members.

The Silver Jubilee Conference will be followed by the second BLS Lymphoedema Awareness Week from 1–5 November, and already regional groups are busy planning a variety of events which will inform and engage local communities. Now is the right time for the BLS and its members to start looking forward to the next 25 years.

Key points

- The British Lymphology Society (BLS) started out 25 years ago as the British Lymphology Interest Group (BLIG).
- The BLS now has a growing membership and holds a successful annual conference.
- This year’s conference in Manchester Town Hall features two eminent speakers from the US.
- The BLS also has a vibrant regional membership.