



Editorial

The World Heart Federation at 62: reflections on the past, present and future



This year marks the 62nd anniversary of the World Heart Federation, an occasion which merits both pride in accomplishment and careful reflection on the future. Decisions made by past leadership have provided the World Heart Federation with a strong base of operations. Recent years have seen the World Heart Federation expand its reach and influence. Going forward, the key challenge for the World Heart Federation leadership will be to shift from an opportunistic, entrepreneurial mindset to that of a sustainable institution as well as to tap into the combined power and capability of all the members. There is still much work to be done to begin to have an impact on the 17.5 million annual deaths from cardiovascular diseases, 80% of which occur in low and middle-income countries.

Looking back, the founders deserve tremendous credit for designing an internationally inclusive membership based organization. In today's global world, working together with members in 100 countries is a tremendous asset that no other organization can easily replicate. The leadership of the then International Society and Federation of Cardiology (ISFC) also deserve special acknowledgement for combining the power of societies of cardiology with the public outreach of heart foundations, a decision they reached 30 years ago. They were ahead of their time in recognizing the need for multi-stakeholder action to combat cardiovascular disease. Both the global member base and the ability to address issues facing patients and populations are critical to the World Heart Federation's

ability to implement its mission “to prevent and control heart disease and stroke with a focus on low and middle-income countries.” Changing the name of the organization from the International Society and Federation of Cardiology to the more easily recognizable World Heart Federation opened the door to increasing influence.

In recent years the World Heart Federation has actively expanded its scope of action from awareness and advocacy to demonstration projects and the sharing of science. Today, World Heart Day messages reach more than 500 million people, and the Go Red for Women campaign, first launched by the American Heart Association, has gathered support from 30 member countries. The call for inclusion of cardiovascular and other chronic diseases in the Millennium Development Goals, an argument first expressed by the World Heart Federation, is an argument whose time may have come as evidenced by the decision of the World Health Organization to launch an expert consultation entitled “MDG plus”. The Wellness in the Workplace initiative of the World Economic Forum, and involving the World Heart Federation, has led to the creation of a Global Agenda Council on Chronic Disease. Cardiovascular and other chronic diseases are now arguably “on the agenda”. Demonstration projects in Colombia, China, Grenada, the Pacific Islands, and a number of African countries provide in depth insight into the real needs of patients and populations, in countries with developing economies. Local member involvement is critical to ensure that all programs are completely relevant to the local context and that the local leadership is fully engaged. The World Congress of Cardiology then provides the stage and platform for sharing the best science of patient care as well as to galvanize action in the public domain. The recent accomplishments are many, and they have been built through the dedication and strong commitment of the leadership, the staff and the membership. However, these “successes” have often been defined opportunistically and have been based on the drive of individual champions. This was critical to the growth of the World Heart Federation to date, but the time has come to shift from growth based on the entrepreneurial spirit of a few to the collective wisdom of the board, staff and membership in systematically defining the strategy for the future. Activities ranging from demonstration projects and publications to communications and corporate relations would all benefit from committee oversight and planning.

Going forward the World Heart Federation has many important challenges and opportunities. First, with both societies and foundations as mem-

bers, it is time to adopt “fusion thinking”. How can the best science flow seamlessly into awareness, advocacy, projects and congresses? How can the Scientific Advisory Board and the Foundations Advisory Board work as one powerful team and not as two separate and distinct sides of the house functioning at times in isolation from one another? How can societies and heart foundations better collaborate in every country and region of the world? Our colleagues from Africa, namely the Pan African Society of Cardiology and the African Heart Network, provide an excellent example of how societies and foundations can collaborate effectively, beginning by participating actively in each others boards.

Second, the global membership has a great deal to offer, and their knowledge, expertise and capabilities need to be recognized and tapped. All members have a critical role to play in defining the way forward. Members from developing economies should lead the way in the definition of their own needs and programs. They must be systematically consulted. Continental organizations could provide an excellent vehicle for consultation. Larger members have expertise to share, and a great deal to offer. Inclusive of all members, not reliance on a few must be the new mantra. If the World Heart Federation leadership can really tap into the full potential of this member network and maximize the contribution of each member of the network, then time will be spent on campaigns and programs that meet a clearly expressed need and have the potential to achieve measurable impact. Finally, it is time to apply best practices in the area of governance. Strong individual championship must give way to carefully defined collective leadership. The power of the few must be replaced by the power of the many. The roles of the Board, its Scientific Advisory Board and its Foundations’ Advisory Board, committees, staff and membership must be clarified. With best practices in good governance in place, the World Heart Federation can further evolve into the strong sustainable institution it deserves to be and that the founders envisaged over 60 years ago.

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Editor’s note: Ms Voûte was the Chief Executive Officer of the World Heart Federation for 8 years until May 2008.

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