THE DREAM IS NOW A REALITY
TEN YEARS AFTER THE FIRST CONGRESS OF BANTAO
(Balkan Cities Association of Nephrology, Dialysis, Transplantation and Artificial Organs)

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In 1991 during the Symposium Nephrology Today and Tomorrow, held in Skopje at the Macedonian Academy of
Sciences and Arts on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the foundation of the Chronic Haemodialysis Programme in the
Republic of Macedonia, several representatives of the various societies of nephrology started an initiative to found a Balkan
society of nephrology. This initiative was expressed in a letter to the Balkan Societies, dated May 17, 1991 and signed by Prof.
Dr. M. Polenakovic, past President of the Yugoslav Society of Nephrology, Prof. Dr. Önen, President of the Turkish Society of
Nephrology, Prof. Dr. D. Nenov, Vice-president of the Bulgarian Society of Nephrology, and Prim. Dr. A. Radmilovic, Director of the Renal Unit – Belgrade City Hospital, Yugoslavia(1).

Figure 1. Initiative for foundation of the Balkan Society of Nephrology

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This initiative has grown with time, and during the First Congress of the Macedonian Society of Nephrology, Dialysis, Transplantation and Artificial Organs, on October 9, 1993 this idea was reconfirmed and transformed into the idea of establishing a Balkan Cities Association of Nephrology, Dialysis, Transplantation and Artificial Organs (BANTAO). So BANTAO was born in Ohrid on October 9, 1993. Several distinguished nephrologists from Europe and the USA, among them Prof. H. Klinkmann (Rostock), Prof. J. Vienken (Bad Hamburg), Prof. D. Falkenhagen (Krems), Prof. P. Ivanovich (Chicago), Prof. P. Zucchelli (Bologna) and Prof. S. Mujais (Chicago) also supported the idea of the foundation of BANTAO.

A task force was formed from representatives of different societies from the Balkan Peninsula to make this project a reality. The task force included the following members: S. Kodra (Albania), D. Nenov (Bulgaria), Z. Kirjakov (Bulgaria), Gj. Masin (Macedonia), M. Polenaković (Macedonia), F. Akcicek (Turkey), E. J. Dorhout Mess (Turkey), Lj. Djukanović (Yugoslavia), A. Radmilović (Yugoslavia) and S. Shahinjić (Yugoslavia). Momir H. Polenaković, President of the Macedonian Society of Nephrology, Dialysis, Transplantation and Artificial Organs was elected as chairman of the task force.

In the letter addressed to the Presidents of the Balkan Societies of Nephrology, the task force members wrote: “It was clear to the participants that the founding of such a Society would have a clear impact on several aspects of the practice and research in nephrology and artificial organs in the Balkans firstly by increasing its international visibility and potential collaborative work, and recognition by international organisations. Secondly, such a society would facilitate the exchange of experience and knowledge between the experts in our area. In addition, it would be a very positive symbolic act showing that collaborative work for the betterment of life is possible and desirable in our area and that coming together will bear better fruits on the human and cultural levels. It will also send a very clear signal to the outside world that the Balkans can be a place of collaboration and mutual understanding. Several international bodies such as the International Society of Artificial Organs and the International Faculty of Artificial Organs have signalled their interest in and support for the formation of such a society” (2).

Figure 2. Initiative for formation of BANTAO
After intensive mutual contacts and work by the members of the task force group with the other Balkan nephrologists it was decided that the first BANTAO Congress would be held in Varna from 22nd to 24th, 1995.

The Congress in Varna was very successful, with more than 80 papers presented by nephrologists from the Balkans as well as from other European cities.
Figure 4. Abstracts of the first BANTAO Association Meeting, Varna, Bulgaria, 22-24 September 1995.

Selected abstracts of the first BANTAO Congress in Varna, Bulgaria, were also published in *Nephrology Dialysis Transplantation*: official publication of the European Renal Association – European Dialysis and Transplant Association. (3) Prof. F. Valderrábano, chairman of the EDTA – ERA Registry, at that time, wrote in *Nephrology Dialysis Transplantation* (1996) 11:70 (4): “Nephrologists of the Balkan countries meet across political frontiers and war fronts – an example to politicians! BANTAO: a new European medical association overcomes political obstacles.” He wrote: “On September 22-24th, 1995, the constitution and first Congress of a new scientific association, called BANTAO, took place in Varna, Bulgaria. BANTAO stands for Balkan Cities Association of Nephrology, Dialysis, Transplantation and Artificial Organs.”

“This is an extraordinary initiative of nephrologists working in cities throughout the Balkan countries who have been able to create a scientific association and to organize its first congress, despite the boundaries of war, the rupture of international relations and other serious political problems which emerged in the Balkan countries after the disappearance of the former Republic of Yugoslavia.”

“Nephrologists from Varna, Sofia, Belgrade, Szeged, Niš, Timișoara, Ljubljana, Skopje, İzmir, Serres, Cluj-Napoca, Thessaloniki, Struga, Pleven, Istanbul, Kishinev, Miskolc, Bucharest and other cities of the Balkan Peninsula and surrounding countries met at this first congress and signed the constitution of the new association.

“The main goal of BANTAO is to promote scientific and technical cooperation in the field of renal diseases and artificial organs between the Balkan cities. This goal will be achieved not only through a periodic congress, but also through lectures exchange, fellowship exchange, scientific research methods exchange, joint meetings and courses, publications and cooperation in the field of renal transplant.

“BANTAO wants to work closely with other international societies, especially with EDTA-ERA.”
“This first Congress was organized under the coordination of Prof. D. Nenov and with the collaboration of Prof. Z. Kirjakov, President of the Bulgarian Society of Nephrology.

“BANTAO represents an extraordinary initiative and should receive both scientific and economic support from the EDTA-ERA. The exceptional effort of collaboration shown by our Balkan colleagues, who have been able to carry out scientific activities in extremely adverse human conditions, is an example to the European nephrological community, which should not hesitate to offer all possible help to this new association” (4).

The Second Congress of BANTAO was held from September 6th to 10th, 1997 in Struga, Republic of Macedonia.

The Second Congress of BANTAO was sponsored by the European Society for Artificial Organs (ESAO), the International Society for Artificial Organs (ISAO), the International Faculty for Artificial Organs (INFA) and the European Renal Association, European Dialysis and Transplant Association (ERA/EDTA). It was held in conjunction with the Second Congress of the Macedonian Society of Nephrology, Dialysis, Transplantation and Artificial Organs.

The Congress was attended by 130 physicians from the states of former Yugoslavia and 70 physicians from other Balkan countries. There were also a number of guests from Europe and the USA. Prof. M. Polenaković (Skopje) was the Congress President, Prof. H. Klinkmann (Dean of INFA) (Rostock) was the President of the Scientific Committee and Dr. A. Šikole (Skopje) the Secretary General. Prof. M. Polenaković and Prof. F. Berthoux wrote: “The main goal of BANTAO is to promote scientific and technical cooperation in the fields of renal disease and artificial organs between the regions on the Balkan Peninsula, to give an opportunity for exchange of experience and knowledge among the experts in the area and to engage in collaborative projects in order to demonstrate that cooperation is possible even on the turbulent Balkan peninsula. The scientific programme consisted of 23 guest lectures, 54 oral and 80 poster presentations covering six topics, i.e. epidemiology of renal diseases, acute renal failure, renal replacement therapy, systemic disease, progress in nephrology and drugs and the kidney.”

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Figure 5. Report of the Second BANTAO Congress, Struga, 6-8 September 1997
"The Congress was a resounding success, and it has therefore been decided to organize the next meeting in Belgrade in 1998 and in Izmir in 1999" (5).

The presented papers were published in the Proceedings of the 2nd Congress of BANTAO (6).
The Third BANTAO Congress was held in conjunction with the sixth Yugoslav Congress of Nephrology in Belgrade from September 18th to 20th, 1998. The President of the Congress was Prof. Lj. Djukanović (Belgrade) and the Secretaries were Dr. V. Lezačić and B. Stojmirović (Belgrade).

The main topics were: renal replacement therapy in the BANTAO region, the role of auxiliary therapy in chronic renal failure and tubulointerstitial disorders and diseases. A Post-Congress symposium was devoted to Balkan endemic nephrology.
The Fourth Congress of BANTAO in conjunction with the 16th Congress of the Turkish National Nephrology, Dialysis, Transplantation and Hypertension Society was held in Izmir, Turkey from 14th to 16th November 1999. Prof. Dr. Ali Basci (Izmir) was Secretary and Prof. Dr. F. Akcicek (Izmir) was the President of the Congress.

Symposia about the Marmara (north-western Turkey) earthquake attracted great attention. The issues of collaboration in the disaster; to be a nephrologist in the disaster field; acute renal failure in the crush syndrome and nephrology in the intensive care unit were well accepted by the participants in the Congress.

The Congress was a further success of the Association. Sharing of personal experiences and problems, mutual contacts improved friendship between nephrologists from the Balkan countries.
The 5th Congress of BANTAO was held in Thessaloniki from September 30th to October 3rd, 2001. Prof. Dr. Ch. P. Stathakis (Athens) was the President of the Congress, and J. N. Boletis (Athens) and N. Dombros (Thessaloniki) were the secretaries. The Congress was a great success.

The aim of the scientific programme of the congress was twofold. Firstly, to meet the needs for continuing education, and secondly, to up-date the participants on current trends and future progress in the fields of adult and pediatric clinical nephrology, dialysis, transplantation, hypertension, therapeutic apheresis and urinary tract infections.
Seventy-two lectures were presented, 59 of which were published in a special supplement to *Nephrology Dialysis Transplantation*: Official Publication of ERA/EDTA (7). In total 250 abstracts were submitted and approximately 600 participants attended the Congress.

*Figure 10. Main Announcement, Fifth BANTAO Congress, Thessaloniki, Greece, 30th September-3rd October 2001*
Prof. Ch. P. Stathakis and colleagues published a special newspaper - Medical Report with BANTAO News – and informed all participants about the work of the Congress.

Figure 11. Medical Report, Fifth BANTAO Congress
Figure 12. Expanding the prospects of nephrology in the Balkan Peninsula

The 6th Congress of BANTAO was held for the second time in Varna from 6th to 9th October 2003 under the presidency of Prof. Dr. D. Nenov (Varna). More than 400 medical doctors from 72 Balkan cities participated in the work of the congress presenting 343 abstracts.

For the first time there were published two issues of the BANTAO Journal with the abstracts, extended abstracts and invited lectures (Proceedings) of the Congress (8, 9). The publication BANTAO Journal is very important for the growth of the Association. This Congress was also very successful (10).
Figure 13. Third Announcement, Sixth BANTAO Congress, Varna, Bulgaria, 6-9 October 2003
Despite the difficulties imposed by major events, such as devastating wars and catastrophic earthquakes in many countries of the Balkan Peninsula, the Balkan Cities Association of Nephrology, Dialysis, Transplantation and Artificial Organs (BANTAO) has made considerable progress. Following the first six successful congresses: Varna (1995), Struga (1997), Belgrade (1998), Izmir (1996), Thessaloniki (2001), and Varna (2003), the BANTAO Congress was established as the major scientific and institutional forum for Balkan nephrologists, with its own journal, indicating our will to communicate, to collaborate, to get to know each other and to share our difficulties. More than a professional event, the BANTAO Congress became a cultural phenomenon, through which we discovered that we have many more things in common than we previously thought, and that we must take every advantage now of being able to live and communicate in a world without political
boundaries. Till now, the BANTAO Council has managed, in a spirit of peace, friendship and collaboration, to continuously strengthen this association and, moreover, to make it a reputable part of the European and international ones. In this spirit the Constitution of BANTAO has already been created.

It was decided the BANTAO Congress would be held every two years in a different Balkan country and in a different city.

The 7th Congress of BANTAO will be held in Ohrid from 8th to 11th September 2005 under the presidency of Prof. Dr. M. Polenaković (Skopje). The Organising Committee of the 7th BANTAO Congress, the presidents of the Scientific Committee - Prof. H. Klinkmann and Prof. Ch. P. Stathakis – are very gratified to see the increased attention that has been paid to this 7th BANTAO Congress. This interest in the 2005 Ohrid Congress is outstanding.

Figure 15. Main Announcement, Seventh BANTAO Congress, Ohrid, Republic of Macedonia, 8-11 September 2005.
270 abstracts have been accepted, 43 for oral presentation (free communications) and the remaining 227 for poster presentations. We have 43 invited guest lecturers in the fields (sections) of the Epidemiology of Renal Disease, Basic Science, Clinical Nephrology, Dialysis, Transplantation and Artificial Organs. Ten symposia will present the latest achievements in specific nephrology fields.

The uremic toxicity group EUTox, under the umbrella of ESAO, will contribute to the congress with a round table entitled An update on uremic toxicity.

At this 7th BANTAO Congress there will be for the first time a CME Course organized by ERA/EDTA and ISN/COMGAN entitled Frontiers in Nephrology with seven distinguished speakers.

Figure 16. CME Courses in 2005

Two issues of the BANTAO Journal for 2005 (Vol.3, Nos. 1 and 2) with abstracts and extended abstracts have been published (11).
The congress is focused on several topics, as for example:
- How to improve the Balkan renal registry?
- Prevention in nephrology;
- Prevention of progression of renal disease;
- Understanding renal fibrosis; and
- Kidney transplantation on the Balkan Peninsula.
We believe that mutual collaboration among nephrologists from the Balkan Peninsula in the spirit of BANTAO will improve the early diagnosis of renal diseases and the treatment and rehabilitation of renal patients, and solve some of the above-mentioned issues.

It is unfortunately not possible to mention all the individuals, all the events and all the achievements of the members of BANTAO here.

We would like to thank all of you and other colleagues for your support for the development of nephrology on the Balkan Peninsula and for BANTAO’s ideas.

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