



## Present, Past, and Future of the Latin American Association for the Study of the Liver- Asociación Latino Americana para el Estudio del Hígado (ALEH)

Javier Brahm,\* Fernando A. Contreras-Peña\*\*

\* Section of Gastroenterology, Clinical Hospital, University of Chile, Santiago, Chile. President ALEH 2014-2016.

\*\* National University Pedro Henríquez Ureña, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. President ALEH 2016-2018.

The Latin American Association for the Study of the Liver (Asociación Latinoamericana para el Estudio del Hígado, ALEH) is celebrating its 50th anniversary. Since its foundation in 1958, it has grown from an association of only four countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Venezuela) to 19 countries in 2018 and has become the official voice of the hepatologist in Latin America. It includes Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries of the region of Latin American and the Caribbean (from Mexico to Chile), accounting to more than 650 million people and approximately 14% of the world's territory.

Its mission is to promote the hepatology in our region, through the exchange with specialists in the area and with the rest of the world and the community in general. Its vision is to achieve through different scientific activities, a position of leadership in the specialty, not only locally but also internationally. As a regional Association, it has participated in international activities with our sister Societies, including the Global Liver Summits held at the AASLD and EASL yearly meetings and joint work in case of specific projects. A good example was the signing of the Joint Society Statement "Elimination of Viral Hepatitis as a public health threat by the year 2030" during the International Liver Congress held in Barcelona (April 2016), together with AASLD, EASL, and APASL.

During its existence, ALEH has had 25 presidents, lasting a 2-year term each, from 9 different countries (6 from Chile, 6 from Argentina, 5 from Brazil, 3 from Venezuela, 2 from Mexico, and 1 from Colombia, Costa Rica, Peru and the Dominican Republic). Its main activity is a biannual Congress with the participation of all the countries of the region and faculties from all over the world that has been held uninterruptedly in the country of the respective President. For example, in September 2012 it took place

in Lima (Peru), September 2014 in Cancún (México) and September 2016 in Santiago (Chile). Other activities include supporting local scientific meetings in our countries and collaborative works such as Regional Guidelines. We also have a renewed web page and a monthly News section that includes general information and news for our members. Our official *Journal is the Annals of Hepatology*, where many of the Editorial Board are ALEH members, and most of the Latin American scientific contributions, including collaborative works and guidelines, are published. ALEH is also a very diverse society because its members not only are from many different countries but also because they are trained in many different places, i.e., Spain, France, England, USA and within Latin America. Thanks to this we have developed a worldwide network of friendship and scientific collaboration.

Since changes were necessary to our institutional framework, the ALEH South Pacific Summit was held in Chile in July 2015, where our past, present, and future were discussed for two days. The main conclusions of this meeting were: Modifications of our Bylaws, the establishment of the ALEH Permanent Executive Office in Santiago (Chile), the creation of a Permanent Board made up by ten members and the creation of ALEH Foundation. A nonprofit organization with the capacity to obtain the resources needed to achieve all the futures plans for improving the Latin American hepatology

We have been present and participated in more than 30 regional conferences in the past three and a half years, promoting the integration and collaboration between different countries and Liver and Gastroenterology Societies. Besides, we have promoted and published in our web page 3 books on Hepatology written by Martin Tagle from Peru and by Juan Suarez from Ecuador, and recently a Liver Pa-

thology book written by Miguel Bruguera from Barcelona. Because of our fluent relationships with other International Liver Societies, we were present with an official booth for the first time in the EASL Congress (Vienna, April 2015) and AASLD Congress (San Francisco, November 2015), with the expected reciprocity in our meetings (Starting September 2016) and has been present in each of the subsequent meetings.

The last XXIV ALEH Congress held in Santiago (Chile) from September 28th to October 1st, 2016, was a successful meeting, with more than 600 attendees and 180 abstracts as posters and oral presentations were presented. The faculty was made up of more than 50 speakers from all over the world, with active participation from the audience. First, we had a Postgraduate Hepatology Course given by Hospital Clinic from Barcelona, a joint ALEH and AASLD Research Workshop from young investigators, a Symposium of Acute on Chronic Liver Failure given by the European Foundation for the Study of Chronic Liver Failure (EF-CLIF), a Postgraduate Course provided by Mayo Clinic from USA and parallel and plenary conferences. We also held private working meetings of the current 6 Groups of Interest within our Association (Hepatitis C, Liver Transplantation, Hepatocellular Carcinoma, Drug-Induced Liver Injury, Autoimmune and Alcoholic Liver Diseases). These groups should allow collaborative studies and also have regional epidemiological data on some particular diseases. Finally, the General Assembly took place and gave a report of the last two years activities to all delegates and, following our tradition, the Presidency was handed over from Chile (J.B.) to Dominican Republic (F.C.).

There is a shortage of experts in liver diseases in the ALEH region. At the same time, significant disparities including the access to Liver Transplantation between different countries is a great challenge. Therefore, we have signed in the past several agreements with well-known international and Latin American Liver Units and renowned Universities to foster the spread of hepatology and try to overcome such differences.

The present of ALEH is better than ever, and the recent changes set the stages for a brighter future. When we formulated the plan for the years to come, we looked at our past, looking up to our sister Societies as a role model to follow. We realize the need to achieve several goals, such as strengthening our ties with the 16 society members through closer collaboration with their local activities, providing guidance and leadership not only on the academic front but also in the crafting of current health policies for liver-related diseases. This comprehensive package includes a strategy to increase public awareness of liver disease, obtain epidemiological data, to take advantage of the recent progress on the diagnosis and treatment,

making available the new technologies and powerful and effective drugs and underline the urgent need and benefit to increase access to care to everyone.

Another important role is to provide educational programs at the basic, intermediate and expert level. To accomplish this, we created a two-day Clinical Hepatology Course, with a state of the art lecture with an emphasis on treatment. The first course was held May 2017 in Bogota, Colombia. This Course was enriched by the presentation of the best abstract on treatment from the last of AASLD, EASL, and ALEH meetings. The second course will be held next year with the same format, and at this time a Pan-American Symposium will be added with the collaboration of AASLD, CASLD, and AMH.

At a more expert level will offer two annual scholarships to young hepatologists to assist to the Master of Hepatology from the "Universidad de Barcelona" and two annual scholarships to an Online Master of Hepatology sponsored by the "Universidad Autónoma de Madrid" and "Universidad de Alcalá de Henares," which have been offered to each member. We are also offering five two-week rotations to OSCHNER CLINIC in the USA, annually. The first scholars of each of these programs were delighted by the tremendous educational experience they had, and all of them are back in their countries.

ALEH's leadership team and many of the members have dedicated time, energy and resources in hopes of building ALEH to the global standards set by our sister associations and others. We are pleased and humbled to receive support for the XXV ALEH Congress from AASLD and EASL, APASL and the Panamerican Association of Infectology (API,) whose governing boards for each will be attending and leading academic symposia. Also, the American Society of Gastrointestinal Endoscopy (ASGE) have also confirmed their attendance and collaboration by leading an academic symposium and a learning center.

We are currently organizing the 2018 ALEH Congress (the flagship academic activity), that will take place in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, with emphasis on the quality presentations of the faculty composed of over 60 well renown international experts from Europe, Asia, North America and from most countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. This Congress is three and a half days of academic activities will include a Post-graduate Course the 1st day from 8 am to 6 pm followed by two and a half days of pure academic activities. These activities include eight breakfasts with the experts, three plenary sessions, eight parallel sessions and two additional industry symposia and an AASLD workshop for young investigators from 8 am to 2 pm. Over 200 original abstracts are going to be presented as an oral presentation and at the plenary section and as posters.

ALEH Governing board realized that one of the most important responsibilities we have is to encourage basic, clinical and collaborative investigations throughout our continent. We are currently with the help of AASLD and EASL providing a course on how to do productive basic and clinical research, and also the interest groups are a great tool to channel collaborative work.

And last but not least, ALEH wishes to provide tools for the professional development and the real life issues

encountered in the day-to-day practice of the Latin American hepatologists by helping them to find jobs and to have a successful career.

**Correspondence and reprint request:**

Fernando Contreras, MD.

President of Latin American Association for the Study of the Liver.

Estoril 50 oficina 1005 – Las Condes Santiago -Chile.

Email: fernandocontreras60@gmail.com