

**The 15<sup>th</sup> International Balint Congress** took place from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> of September 2007 in the Portuguese capital, Lisbon. This was our first meeting in Portugal and we were looked after with care and style by our hosts in the Portuguese Balint Society. The Congress was attended by 156 delegates from 18 countries and it was a memorable and enjoyable occasion both scientifically and socially. Lisbon is a delightful city with many different aspects. Its architecture begins with the Romans, goes on to reflect the Moorish inheritance and continues with the spectacular Gothic architecture exemplified by the San Jeronimo monastery in Belém. After the disastrous earthquake of 1755 a major part of the City was rebuilt resulting in the delightful and evocative streets and squares of districts such as the Baixa, the Chiado and the Bairro Alto. Lisbon is a lovely city to wander round. And in the evening we could eat and drink outdoors at friendly little restaurants where the staff not only cook and serve but entertain their guests by singing and playing *fado*, that very special haunting and soulful music of Portugal.

The Congress was held on top of one of Lisbon's many hills. Our venue was the University Faculty of Medical Science where generations of Portuguese medical students have learned to be doctors. Opposite the building is a pleasant park with ducks and geese, where we could relax in between sessions and eat our lunch. Presiding over the scene was the statue of Lisbon's much-loved physician, Dr José Thomás de Sousa Martins (1843-1897). His benign figure is surrounded by marble plaques expressing the thanks of his many devoted patients.

The theme of the Congress was *Medicine, Evidence and Emotions 50 years on...* In the scientific sessions we listened to a variety of papers grouped under four broad headings: Past and Future; Research; New Contexts and Training. In the first session we heard about the beginnings of the Balint group and its development over the last half century. Michael Courtenay recalled working in a very early group led by Michael and Enid Balint and invited us to consider how we might have treated Marcel Proust and his psychosomatic asthma. Michelle Moreau Ricaud who is a distinguished Balint historian as well as an analyst reminded us of the importance of responding to the evidence of our patients' emotions. The papers on Research continued the theme of empathy and demonstrated how Balint work can enhance our empathic capacity and intelligence. There was also the question of how much empathy we can bear and the role of our defences. Widening our gaze to take in New Contexts we learned about Balint groups for clergy, hospital doctors and patients with chronic illness. The place of Balint in our Post-modern world was also considered. The Training papers told us about the encouraging results of offering Balint groups to residents (trainees) and students, whose emotional responses were often very moving. Finally it was a great pleasure to hear from students themselves when the four winners of the Ascona student essay prizes told us about their student-patient encounters. All the papers have been published in the *Proceedings of the Congress* and the book includes a group of papers that were not read out but are well worth reading.

When we were not listening to speakers and discussing their work we had the opportunity to take part in Balint groups in Portuguese, English, French and German. These included some groups for leaders in which members were able to experience and discuss some very different leadership styles.

The Congress began with some wonderful music from a group of instrumentalists. The Social Programme also included a Balint Lisbon Trek, up the hill to the Castle. And it culminated in a lavish dinner with entertainment by a very accomplished *fado*

singer who completely seduced and delighted us. Dr Antónia Lavinha then showed us that she was a pretty good amateur fado singer herself and could even write some medically themed lyrics for her own songs. After that everyone had to sing and we were treated to a series of solos and ensembles featuring songs from all the participating countries in a sort of EuroBalint Song Contest. A great time was had by all.

As in the previous Congresses in Berlin (2003) and Sweden (2005) there was a sense of community with our extended family of Balint enthusiasts taking up the ideas from the previous conference and developing them further. We are very grateful to our Portuguese hosts, and especially Drs Antónia Lavinho and Jorge Brandão for organising such a brilliant Congress. We are already looking forward to the 16<sup>th</sup> International which will be held in the ancient Saxon town of Brazov, in the Carpathian Mountains of Romania in 2009.

**John Salinsky**