

## **Brief History of ASSERT**

Compiled by Dr Martyn Baker and Dr Margaret Redelman

The first national Australian conference on Sex Therapy took place in Brisbane organized by the Psychology Department of the University of Queensland in 1974. Then in June 1977, a small group of clinicians with a specific interest in sexuality met in Sydney and the organisation we now know as ASSERT was born. Initially conceived as AASECT (Australian Association of Sex Educators Counsellors and Therapists (original registered business name), the acronym morphed to AASERT out of deference to our American cousins, and subsequently to ASSERT, the Australian Society of Sexuality Educators Researchers and Therapists.

Psychologist Greta Goldberg as the prime convener of AASERT was elected as the first president, and the core group included Dr Derek Richardson, Dr Jules Black, Ms Bettina Arndt, Dr Warwick Williams and Dr Derek Llewellyn-Jones.

Similar groups of interested clinicians in Victoria and Western Australia registered interest in the New South Wales initiative and the first national conference of AASERT was held in Canberra, in November 1980. This was enthusiastically attended by more than 100 delegates. Keynote speakers included Julia Heiman and Chris Tietze from the USA.

ASSERT attracted many speakers from overseas. In 1981 John Money was the keynote speaker in Sydney, where his concepts of “Love Maps and Love Blots” made the banner headlines for the Sunday newspapers. Interestingly Australian author-to-be Kathy Lette (author of “Puberty Blues”) was the conference reporter at the time on behalf of the Bulletin magazine.

In 1982 Ted and Sandra Cole from Ann Arbor ran workshops in Sydney and were keynote speakers at our third conference in Melbourne. Joseph LoPiccolo visited Sydney twice. Harvey Gochros from Hawaii and David McWhirter with Andrew Mattison from San Diego were also keynote speakers at our conferences.

Forum magazine, edited by Bettina Arndt, did much to change the sexual landscape in Australia. Women’s magazines such as Cosmopolitan and Cleo followed the sex education format with sealed sections on the “G” spot and other sexual issues which did much to boost magazine circulation.

In 1983, under Derek Richardson, it was decided to develop ASSERT into a national organisation. Because of the geographical challenges that Australia imposed on the numerically small membership, it was planned to rotate the administration of ASSERT National, through the states. During the 1983 conference in Perth, Western Australia, Dr Gwen Leavesley was endorsed as president.

Sadly, the national strategy was not successful as the professional needs and priorities of each state were different. By 1985 it was decided that ASSERT should return to a co-operative with autonomous state bodies. There was further disappointment when the Australian bid in Delhi in 1985, headed by Drs Jules Black and Martyn Baker, to host the 1989 WAS Congress in Sydney was not successful.

During the 1990s ASSERT organisations were established in many states: Victoria, South Australia in 1995 and Queensland in 1994. In Western Australia the sexual society was established in 1986 and called WASS – Western Australia Sexology Society.

In 1995 Dr David Schnarch introduced his ideas about the Sexual Crucible in workshops across the nation under the auspices of Relationships Australia and ASSERT. In 1999 collaboration between Dr Michelle Phillips of Calgary and Geraldine Slattery from South Australia led to workshops in Adelaide, Brisbane and Sydney focusing on 'Affirming Women's Sexuality'.

By the late 1990s a new wave of national co-operation was born and a new National Council of ASSERT was established in 1998. The newly reformed ASSERT National had a clearly formulated mission and plan to develop a national constitution, a code of ethics, national professional standards and to encourage national conferences on a regular basis across the nation. In 1999 ASSERT South Australia presented 'Sexualities: The Australian Kaleidoscope' in Adelaide, in 2002 WASS hosted 'Essential Directions for Sexology' in Fremantle and in 2004 ASSERT NSW presented in conjunction with the School of Biomedical Sciences, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Sydney, 'Sexual Diversity in the 21st Century' in Sydney.

The national presidency rotated between the states. Mark Anns from NSW was the first president (1997-1998), followed by Dr Diane Summers from Queensland (1998-2000), then Gareth Merriman from Western Australia (2000-2004) and Dr Margaret Redelman from NSW (2004-2009).

The main goals for ASSERT changed slightly from an organization with a dual focus on community needs and professional needs, to one with the main focus on professional needs. The Sexuality Professional focus included the aims to raise the profile of Sexual Health and provide continuing education and support for Sexual Health Professionals. ASSERT National developed a unified national accreditation policy for: Sexuality Therapist, Sexuality Educator and Sexuality Researcher.

ASSERT joined the WAS (World Association for Sexual Health) family. And Aussis have actively participated. Dr Jules Black from NSW was on the advisory committee of WAS from 1985 thru 2001, Co-Secretary 1985-1989 and Secretary-General/Treasurer WAS from 1989 thru 1993. Professor Rosemary Coates from Western Australia was Vice-President of WAS till her election as President in 2009. Two Australians have received the WAS Gold medal, Dr Lorraine Dennerstein in 2005 (for her research in women's sexual health) and Dr Helen O'Connell in 2007 (for her fuller description of women's sexual organs).

Although Australia is very isolated geographically from the rest of the world, ASSERT has been active in professionally embracing and supporting sexual health issues. There is a growing expertise in Sexology/Sexual Health in Australia and we have two university programs in Sexology/Sexual Health – University of Sydney in New South Wales and Curtin University in Western Australia. The Sydney University program grew out of the initial Diploma of Sexual Health Counselling that ASSERT NSW had set up with the Australasian College of Venereologists. ASSERT NSW worked very actively with Sydney University in the setting up of their program.

We look forward to the healthy growth and professional relevance of ASSERT.