ABSTRACT

The Balkan Cities Association of Nephrology, Dialysis, Transplantation and Artificial Organs (BANTAO) was established in Ohrid, Republic of Macedonia on October 9, 1993 during the First Congress of the Macedonian Society of Nephrology, Dialysis, Transplantation and Artificial Organs (MSNDTAO).

The idea of the founders was that such Society would have a clear impact on several aspects of 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 organizations. Secondly, such a society would facilitate the exchange of experience and knowledge between 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 at 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 signaled their interest in and support for the creation of such a society. Despite the turbulent times in the Balkan Peninsula, the First BANTAO Congress was held in Varna from September 22 to 24, 1995, which was an impressive event. F. Valderrabano, Chairman of the EDTA–ERA registry reported on that event with a lot of sympathy in the paper entitled “Nephrologists of the Balkan countries meet across political frontiers and war fronts – an example to politicians. The foundation of and the Second Congress of BANTAO were also well accepted by the colleagues nephrologists from Russia. The Second Congress was held on September 6-10, 1997 in Struga, the Third BANTAO Congress was held on September 18-20, 1998 in Belgrade, the Fourth Congress of BANTAO was held in Izmir on November 14-16, 1999, the Fifth Congress of BANTAO was held in Thessaloniki on September 30 – October 3, 2001, the 6th BANTAO Congress was held in Varna, on October 6-9, 2003, the 7th BANTAO Congress was held in Ohrid, on September 8-11, 2005, the 8th BANTAO Congress was held in Belgrade, on September 16-19, 2007, the 9th BANTAO Congress was held in Antalya, November 18-22, 2009, the 10th BANTAO Congress was held in Chalkidiki, October 13-15, 2011, the 11th BANTAO Congress was held from 26 to 29 September 2013 in Timisoara on the 20th Anniversary of the foundation of BANTAO, the 12th BANTAO Congress was held on October 15-18, 2015 in Opatija, the 13th BANTAO Congress was held on 4-8 October, 2017 in Sarajevo, the 14th BANTAO Congress was held on September 20-23, 2018, in Budva and the 15th BANTAO Congress was held in Skopje, 26-29 September 2019.

Another milestone in the life of BANTAO was the appearance of the BANTAO journal in 2003, which has been published biannually since then. In the past 17 years there have been 33 editions of the journal and seven supplements reporting BANTAO congresses. The editors of the journal past and present are: 2003–2005 (Dimitar Nenov); 2005–2009 (Ali Basci); 2009– (Goce Spasovski). Up to date, more than 400
papers have been published. The BANTAO journal is registered on EBSCO, DOAJ, SCOPUS, and has become a strong "glue" among nephrologists from the Balkan cities. The BANTAO congresses and the BANTAO journal have succeeded in elevating nephrology knowledge and thus increased the standards of nephrology patient care throughout the Balkans. Standing above the divisive forces of politics, language and war, BANTAO gives a living example that collaboration and humility are feasible in times of maddenng destruction, and are transformative.

**Keywords:** Balkan Cities Association of Nephrology, Dialysis, Transplantation and Artificial Organs (BANTAO), Congresses, BANTAO journal

## INTRODUCTION

Following the First scientific meeting of the nephrologists from the former Yugoslavia, held from 26 to 28 September 1977 in Struga, Republic of Macedonia, which was a strong impetus for the development of nephrology in Yugoslavia, the cooperation between the nephrologists from Yugoslavia became more and more developed with the aim of improving the diagnostics and treatment of the patients with kidney disease [1].

The last Fourth Congress of the Yugoslav Society of Nephrology was held in Skopje, R. Macedonia, from 27 to 30 September 1989. Numerous nephrologists from the country and abroad participated in the Congress. Some of the papers presented at the Congress were published in the Proceedings of the Congress “Nephrology ’89” [2]. Unfortunately, shortly after the Congress, former Yugoslavia collapsed in a bloody war.

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Fig. 1. Copy of the initiative
Fratricide, destruction and cruelty were the norm. Nevertheless, in spite of the hatred and political intrigue, Balkan nephrologists were willing to cooperate with each other.

During the scientific symposium on the occasion of 20 years of chronic hemodialysis in Macedonia – “Nephrology Today and Tomorrow”, from 16 to 17 May 1991, Skopje, Republic of Macedonia (3), besides domestic nephrologists, prominent nephrologists from abroad, as Prof. Kemal Onen, President of the Turkish Nephrologists Association, Prof. V. Cambi from Italy, Secretary of ERA/EDTA, Prof. Nenov, Director of the Varna Nephrology Clinic, Bulgaria, Assoc. Prof. R. Kveder from Ljubljana, Slovenia, Dr. A. Radmilovic from Belgrade, Serbia, Assoc. Prof. V. Djordjevic from Niš, Serbia and Assoc. Prof. Labar from Novi Sad, Serbia have participated.

During the Symposium, it was agreed to initiate the formation of a Balkan Nephrology Association.

The nephrologists from Macedonia (M. Polenakovic), Bulgaria (D. Nenov), Serbia (A. Radmilovic) and Turkey (K. Onen) signed a memorandum in which this idea was articulated. [3]

The war in Yugoslavia created hatred among people, between the newly established countries, and there were problems with the recognition of the names of the new countries. To overcome this the nephrologists decided to apply the ancient principle of using the names of the cities, instead of the countries in founding of BANTAO.

BANTAO WAS ESTABLISHED IN OHRID, R. MACEDONIA, ON OCTOBER 9, 1993

So, after the discussion of this initiative, which has grown with time, and during the First Congress of the Macedonian Society of Nephrology, Dialysis, Dialysis, Transplantation and Artificial Organs,
Transplantation and Artificial Organs (MSNDTAO) 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, Republic of Macedonia on October 9, 1993.

Beside nephrologists from the Balkan cities, our international and well recognized colleagues and friends Prof. H. Klinkmann, Prof. J. Vienken, Prof. E. J. Dorhout Mees, Prof. D. Falkenhagen and Prof. P. Ivanovich helped us in creation of a platform for the Association [4].

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 (Tirana), D. Nenov (Varna), Z. Kirjakov (Sofia), Gj. Masin (Skopje), M. Polenaković (Skopje), F. Akcicek (Izmir), E. J. Dorhout Mess (Izmir), Lj. Djukanović (Belgrade), A. Radmilović (Belgrade) and S. Strahinjić (Nis). Momir H. Polenaković, President of the Macedonian Society of Nephrology, Dialysis, Transplantation and Artificial Organs, was elected as chairman of the task force (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3).

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 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 organizations. Secondly, such a society would facilitate the exchange of experience and knowledge between 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 at 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 signaled their interest in and support for the creation of such a society.”

Fig. 3. Some of the Participants
of the I Congress of the MSDNTAO and Founders of BANTAO
BANTAO CONGRESSES

Despite the turbulent times in the Balkan Peninsula, the First BANTAO Congress was held in Varna from September 22 to 24, 1995 (President D. Nenov, Varna), which was an impressive event. F. Valderrabano, Chairman of the EDTA–ERA registry reported on that event with a lot of sympathy in the paper entitled “Nephrologists of the Balkan countries meet across political frontiers and war fronts – an example to politicians!” (Fig. 4) [5].

BANTAO continues to rise and grow: the Second Congress was held on September 6-10, 1997 in Struga (President M. Polenakovic, Skopje) [6]. The foundation of and the Second Congress of BANTAO were well accepted by the colleagues nephrologists from Russia (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6) [7].
Fig. 5. Cover of the Russian journal Nephrology
Fig. 6. The article from the Nephrology journal about the Second Congress of BANTAO, 6-10. X 1997, Struga, R. Macedonia
The 3rd BANTAO Congress was held on September 18-20, 1998 in Belgrade (President Lj. Djukanovic), the 4th BANTAO Congress was held in Izmir on November 14-16, 1999 (President F. Akcicek, Izmir) and the 5th BANTAO Congress was held in Thessaloniki on September 30 – October 3, 2001 (President Ch. P. Stathakis, Athens).

Dimkovic et al. [8] said that the number of participants, presented papers and lectures from distinguished guests increased from congress to congress, although the Association did not even had its own statute, nor membership fee. BANTAO has lived and has thrived to friendship, respect and appreciation among the leading nephrologists from the BANTAO region transferred to all other participants [6]. Ch. Stathakis called the links that connect us as “spirit of BANTAO” and presented it in the logo of the Fifth Congress that became the logo of BANTAO [9, 10].

The next cycle of congresses were held in the same countries as the first five.

The 6th BANTAO Congress was held in Varna, on October 6-9, 2003. President was D. Nenov.

The 7th BANTAO Congress was held in Ohrid, on September 8-11, 2005. President was M. Polenakovic (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7. Main announcement of the 7th BANTAO Congress, 8-11. IX. 2005, Ohrid, R. Macedonia
The 8th BANTAO Congress was held in Belgrade, on September 16-19, 2007. President was V. Nesic.

The 9th BANTAO Congress was held in Antalya, November 18-22, 2009. President was A. Basci.

The 10th BANTAO Congress was held in Chalkidiki, October 13-15, 2011. President was D. Tsakiris.

The 11th BANTAO Congress was held from 26 to 29 September 2013 in Timisoara on the 20th Anniversary of the foundation of BANTAO (Fig. 8 left panel). President of the Congress was A. Schiller. The 12th BANTAO Congress was held on October 15-18, 2015 in Opatija. President was P. Kes (Fig. 8 right panel).

The 13th BANTAO Congress was held on 4-8 October, 2017 in Sarajevo, President was H. Resic.

The 14th BANTAO Congress was held on September 20-23, 2018, in Budva, President was M. Mugosa-Ratkovic.

The 15th BANTAO Congress was held in Skopje, 26-29 September 2019, President was G. Spasovski.

The 16th BANTAO Congress will be held in Tirana in 2020.

The 15th BANTAO Congress that was held in Skopje, 26-29 September 2019, President G. Spasovski, was in honor of the 80th Anniversary of Academician Momir H. Polenakovic, founder of the BANTAO Association (Fig. 9 and Fig. 10).
Fig. 9. Announcement of the 15th BANTAO Congress, 26-29. IX. 2019, Skopje, R. Macedonia
Apart from the well-organized scientific part of the Congress, acknowledgement were made to several distinguished members of the BANTAO Association for their contribution to the development of BANTAO. Acad. Horst Klinkmann talked about “80th anniversary of Acad. Momir Polenakovic - scientist, visionary and friend” (Fig. 11).
Acad. Horst Klinkmann said that the great scientific contribution of Momir Polenakovic to the development of the nephrology in R. Macedonia and in the Balkan Peninsula, are also recognized by the distinguished international societies, such as: National Kidney Foundation of the United States of America (Fig. 12 and Fig. 13); International Society of Nephrology (Fig. 14 and Fig. 15); ERA-EDTA (Fig. 16) and BAN-TAO (Fig. 17).

Fig. 11. Speech of Horst Klinkmann about Momir Polenakovic

Fig. 12. International medal in 1997 of the National Kidney Foundation of the United States of America
Fig. 13. Recipients of the International medal in 1997 of the National Kidney Foundation of the United States of America, from left to right: B. Rutkowski (Poland), G. Eknoyan, President of the National Kidney Foundation of the USA and M. Polenakovic (Republic of Macedonia)

Fig. 14. Award from the International Society of Nephrology (ISN)
If a “pioneer” is “a person who is among the first to research and develop a new area of knowledge or activity” Dr. Momir Polenakovic of Macedonia qualifies for many pioneer awards in nephrology. Under his guidance, the Nephrology Clinic of the Medical Faculty in Skopje became one of the first “centers of excellence” in Eastern Europe where many future nephrologists in the region received their training. Among the many firsts attributed to him are the first dialysis in Macedonia to treat both acute (1965) and chronic renal failure (1971), the first renal transplant in his country (1977), the first percutaneous renal biopsy (early 1970s) and the first use of EPO in a dialysis patient. In 1962, he was the first to write about the Balkan Endemic Nephropathy epidemic in the English language, thereby bringing a new awareness of the significance of environmental causes of renal disease to the larger world. As the discipline of nephrology grew around him, in 1992 he founded the Macedonian Society and several local and regional renal societies after that. For all of these pioneering achievements in nephrology in Eastern Europe, ISN is pleased to award the first Pioneer Award for its East and Central Europe region to Dr. Momir Polenakovic of Macedonia.

Fig. 15. Award from the International Society of Nephrology (ISN)
An inter-disciplinary approach established to disseminate knowledge and information amongst those interested in dialysis, transplantation and renal diseases by this certificate acknowledges

Professor Momir Polenakovic

For his important role in the development of nephrology in the Balkan region and his constant support for ERA-EDTA, especially at the occasion of the 1991 ERA-EDTA Congress when he gave his full support to the ERA-EDTA even in extremely difficult circumstances.

Skopje (F. Y. R. Macedonia), September 27th, 2014

Andrzej Wiecek
ERA-EDTA
President

Jonathan Fox
ERA-EDTA
Secretary-Treasurer

Fig. 16. Certificate of the ERA-EDTA
Fig. 17. BANTAO Award to Academician Momir Polenakovic – the founder of BANTAO for his continuous work in the development of BANTAO on the occasion of his 80th Anniversary, presented by the President of the Congress, Prof. Goce Spasovski
Acad. Polenakovic thanked the promoters and the participants in the Congress for the beautiful wishes for good health and future work. He said that thank to the cooperation with the colleagues from various medical disciplines, he was given the chance to give contribution to the nephrology. He also said that he has learned a lot from the patients how one is to fight for a better life. He presented the current MSNDTAO President Goce Spasovski with his recently published books in the field of nephrology.

M. Polenakovic presented as gifts his publications about nephrology (7 volumes of Publications and 3 books on nephrology) to Goce Spasovski, President of the Macedonian Society of Nephrology, Dialysis, Transplantation and Artificial Organs.

Prof. Spasovski, President of the Congress awarded Horst Klinkmann with the recognition “BANTAO award”.

Fig. 18. M. Polenakovic presented as gifts his publications about nephrology (7 volumes of Publications and 3 books on nephrology) to Goce Spasovski, President of the Macedonian Society of Nephrology, Dialysis, Transplantation and Artificial Organs

Fig. 19. Prof. Spasovski, President of the Congress awarded Horst Klinkmann with the recognition “BANTAO award”
Bantao Congresses were since 2005 in Ohrid, 2007 in Belgrade, 2013 in Timisoara, 2015 in Opatija, 2017 in Sarajevo and 2019 in Skopje, inevitably and generously supported by the ERA-EDTA and/or ISN.

Another milestone in the life of BANTAO was the appearance of the BANTAO journal in 2003, which has been published biannually since then [4]. In the past 17 years there have been 33 editions of the journal and seven supplements reporting BANTAO congresses. The editors of the journal past and present are: 2003–2005 (Dimitar Nenov); 2005–2009 (Ali Basci); 2009– (Goce Spasovski). Up to date, more than 400 papers have been published. The BANTAO journal is registered on EBSCO, DOAJ, SCOPUS, and has become a strong ‘glue’ among nephrologists from the Balkan cities.

Despite the difficulties imposed by devastating wars and catastrophic earthquakes, BANTAO has flourished through the passion and commitment of nephrologists to their patients and to renal science [5]. The BANTAO Congress has been 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 and our successes.

What should BANTAO do in future?

1. Improve further cooperation between the nephrologists and physicians from other related medical specialties from the Balkan cities and the colleagues from Europe and the world. 2. Improve basic and clinical education and research in nephrology in the region. 3. Discover, treat and register patients with CKD. 4. Ensure early diagnosis of diabetes mellitus and hypertension and halt or delay progression to end-stage renal disease. 5. Establish registries for renal biopsy and for rare renal diseases. 6. Improve renal transplantation and establish a Balkan transplant network, connecting with other renal transplant networks in Europe and the world. 7. Improve the fight against infections (especially against hepatitis C). 8. Or-

In summary, the BANTAO congresses and the BANTAO journal have succeeded in elevating nephrology knowledge [6] and thus increased the standards of nephrology patient care throughout the Balkans. Standing above the divisive forces of politics, language and war, BANTAO gives a living example that collaboration and humility are feasible in times of maddening destruction, and are transformative.

REFERENCES

Резиме

ИДЕНИТЕ И ДУХОТ НА ЗДРУЖЕНИЕТО НА БАЛКАНСКИТЕ ГРАДОВИ ЗА НЕФРОЛОГИЈА, ДИЈАЛИЗА, ТРАНСПЛАНТАЦИЈА И ВЕШТАЧКИ ОРГАНИ (БАНТАО) ГИ ПОВРЗУВААТ НЕФРОЛОЗИТЕ ОД БАЛКАНСКИТЕ ГРАДОВИ – ОД ОСНОВАЊЕТО ДО 15. КОНГРЕС НА БАНТАО

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Здружението на балканските градови за нефрологија, дијализа, трансплантација и вештачки органи (БАНТАО) е основано во Охрид, Република Македонија на 9 октомври 1993 година за време на Првот конгрес на Македонското здружение за нефрологија, дијализа, трансплантација и вештачки органи (МЗНДТВО).

Идејата на основачите беше дека таквото здружение ќе има јасно влијание врз неколку аспекти од практиката и истражувањето во нефрологијата и вештачките органи на Балканот: прво, преку зголемување на неговата меѓународна видливост и потенцијална соработка, и признавање од меѓународните организации. Второ, таквото здружение би ја олеснило размената на искуства и знаење меѓу експертите од нашата област. Покрај тоа, би било многу позитивен симболичен чин, кој покажува дека здружението работи за подобрување на животот и можна врска во нашата област. Покрај тоа, би било многу позитивен симболичен чин, кој покажува дека здружението работи за подобрување на животот и можна врска во нашата област.


Друга пресвртница во животот на БАНТАО беше појавувањето на списанието БАНТАО во 2003 година, кое оттогаш се објавува двапати годишно. Во изминатите 17 години имаше 33 изданија на списанието и седум додатоци што известуваат за конгреси на БАНТАО. Минати и сегашни уредници на списанието се: 2003–2005 година (Димитар Ненов); 2005–2009 година (Али Башчи); 2009– (Гоце Спасовски). До денес се објавени повеќе од 400 трудови. Списанието БАНТАО е регистрирано на EBSCO, DOAJ, SCOPUS и стана силно „лепило“ меѓу нефролозите од балканските градови. Конгресите БАНТАО и списанието БАНТАО успеаат да ги зголемат знаењата за нефрозологијата и со тоа да ги зголемат стандардите за пацијентите од нефрозологијата низ целниот Балкан. Стоејќи над силите на развојување на политичката, јазикот и војната, БАН-
ТАО дада жив пример за тоа дека соработката и смиреноста се остварливи во време на лудо уништување и дека може да се трансформираат.

Ключни зборови: Здружението на балканските градови за нефрологија, дијализа, трансплантација и вештачки органи (БАНТАО), конгреси, списание БАНТАО