

Why ISEE is my favorite professional society

For me, ISEE was one of the best things that happened to me in my career. I graduated as an environmental scientist in 1979, with a keen interest in environmental health. Back then I had already taken courses in epidemiology during which I was exposed to the thinking of great pioneers such as John Snow. My 1985 PhD thesis on environmental lead and blood lead in children carried the subtitle 'A study in environmental epidemiology.' My first exposure to the concepts of environmental epidemiology came through the now ancient WHO 1983 monograph on Environmental Epidemiology (EHC 27) edited by two unique – now unfortunately deceased – characters of the field, Mike Lebowitz from the US and Robert Waller from the UK. I still consider it a great privilege that I have come to know and collaborate with both of them.

So, when ISEE held its first international meeting in 1989 at Brookhaven National Laboratories, I was more than ready to go. The meeting was smallish – about a hundred if I remember well. It was clear from the beginning that this was my kind of crowd. I met, among others, Ray Neutra, Carlos Santos-Burgoa, Evelyn Talbott and above all John Goldsmith, often called the grandfather of environmental epidemiology. I think it was quite appropriate that ISEE named its main award after John, given his lifelong commitment to the science and public health practice of environmental epidemiology. From the very beginning, this mix of solid science and public health orientation has always been one of the key features of ISEE. There is always something more important than the next splendid presentation or high impact journal paper, and that is how the things we do can somehow be used to improve environmental conditions.

One other important feature is the international character of ISEE. Starting from North American roots, a whole bunch of Europeans were quick to sign up. Recognizing that environmental health problems are often bigger in less affluent parts of the world, ISEE has strived to engage colleagues from everywhere. Having our annual meetings in places like Taiwan, Mexico, Korea and South Africa has certainly made it easier for colleagues from other parts of the world to become involved, and to educate the membership about the vast array of environmental health issues as they exist across the globe.

ISEE has always been dirt poor, operating on a shoestring budget – large enough though, fortunately, to afford the services of (aptly) John Snow, Inc of Boston to provide backbone organizational support since 1997 or so, personified by Carol Rougvie who it seems now was just always there to help us along. Being a poor organization, ISEE has over the years depended on the good will and creativity of volunteer members to organize the annual meetings. With budgets many times larger than ISEE annual turnover, our annual meetings the risk of the organizers – it is truly remarkable that after almost 25 years, volunteers still line up to host the next meeting, the one after that or even the one after that one. The meetings have grown in size, but also into a capacity building and training ground for new professionals in the field, PhD students and post docs where they can pick up ideas and form bonds with colleagues they would not have easily met otherwise.

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1995 ISEE/ISEA meeting organizer; 1999-2000 ISEE President;

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