THE European Society of Ophthalmology, also known as the Societas Ophthalmologica Europaea (SOE), will hold its annual congress this year in Vienna, the crossroads of Europe, from 9-12 June. Attendees will have an unprecedented selection of sessions, symposia and posters in many subspecialty areas.

Following a successful joint meeting with the American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO) in 2004 in New Orleans, the Vienna congress is again a joint venture with the AAO. “This has proved a useful model and enables ophthalmologists from both sides of the Atlantic to hear what Europe and the US have in common and what either side can learn from each other,” notes Zdenek J Gregor FRCS, FRCOphth, consultant ophthalmic surgeon to Moorfields Eye Hospital, and current president of the SOE.

The Austrian Ophthalmological Society (OOG) has also actively collaborated in the organisation of the Vienna congress and will hold its annual meeting at the same time. The welcome reception will be on the theme of “the 50th Birthday of SOE”. The Gala Dinner will take place in the Vienna Town Hall. The world-famous Vienna Boys Choir will perform at the opening ceremony.

As of this year, the SOE congress will largely be based on symposia created by sub-specialty societies from the US and Europe. A remarkable 27 organisations are involved including the ESCRS, European Society of Retina Specialists (EURETINA), and the European Glaucoma Society.

The highlights of the Vienna congress will be the four keynote lectures, given by Profs Steve Ryan (retina), Richard Colin (oculoplastics), Howard Fine (cataract), and Peng Khaw (glaucoma).

New elements on this year’s programme include Rapid Fire free paper sessions and a European Showcase symposium. In addition, posters will be presented in an electronic format, and there will be a “Best of Posters” session.

The SOE membership encompasses all of Europe, rather than the EU alone. Over the past 50 years the SOE has grown from a relatively small society into a conglomerate of the national ophthalmological societies of all the 40 European countries: from Iceland in the west to the far reaches of the Russian Federation in the east, and from Finland in the north to Malta in the south, representing more than 40,000 European ophthalmologists.

As an educational organisation, the SOE has a long tradition of reaching out to colleagues in the former communist countries of Eastern Europe, especially for the ophthalmologists-in-training, Dr Gregor said.

The society provides discounted registration fees for all Eastern European ophthalmologists. Additional discounts are given for ophthalmologists-in-training, and younger ophthalmologists who submit abstracts.

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“We offer more than 40 educational travel grants to ophthalmologists-in-training from our Eastern European colleagues, which apart from financial assistance, opens doors to the major western centres. We have now spent over 750,000 on such grants,” Dr Gregor emphasised.

The organisation actively supports courses for European ophthalmologists-in-training organised by European University Professors of Ophthalmology (EUPO), both by providing a venue during the SOE congress and by helping out financially between SOE congresses. The SOE congresses are recognised for CME credits by all European countries and by ACCME in the US. The SOE now also collaborates more closely with the European Board of Ophthalmology (EBO), and joint educational and accreditation activities are under discussion.

The SOE has established strong connections with many European specialty organisations including the ESCRS. It has joint meetings with the German (DOG), French (SFO), and Slovenian societies. It is now also expanding its network to include new Associated Members beyond the borders of Europe including Egypt, Israel, and Jordan. Indeed, the SOE will hold the first joint Congress with the Egyptian Ophthalmological Society in Cairo, 14-16 March of this year.

Zdenek J Gregor

East meets West - SOE reaches out in Vienna