A Short History of the New England Chapter of the AAPM (NEAAPM)

New England has a history of professional medical physics activities going to the very early days of the AAPM. The greater Boston area, in particular, is home to a number of medical schools and affiliated teaching hospitals with a strong tradition of being at the forefront of technical innovation.

The details of the very early origins are somewhat fragmentary, though the original constitution which created the New England chapter has survived. The document, written in January 1964, stated that the chapter would include the states of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island. It was signed on March 3rd, 1964 by then AAPM president Edward (Ted) Webster. Originally from England, Ted was also from the Boston Area. He came to MIT in 1949 for postdoctoral work in nuclear physics and engineering and during this time he was involved in a 2-MV cancer treatment program with Boston’s Lahey Clinic. He later joined the staff of the department of Radiology at Massachusetts General Hospital in 1953 in the newly-created post of physicist. In 1959 he became the chairman of the AAPM and served as the 5th president for the organization in 1963. Dr. Webster would have a long and distinguished career at MGH, retiring in 2001 after 47 years of service. He passed away in December 2005.

While Ted Webster was from New England, his signature on the 1964 constitution was as AAPM President, and not as representative of the New England chapter per se. The signature for Secretary-Treasurer of the New England Chapter is that of William H. Elliott who appears to be the oldest documented member of the NEAAPM board. While not remembered specifically by older members still in New England today, he does appear on the 1959 list of charter members of the AAPM. A literature search reveals that in 1964 he was a physicist working at the Physics Research Laboratory at MGH. He appears on a number of publications from 1963-1968, including an article in the Journal Nature, all co-authored with well known physicist and research laboratory director Gordon Brownell. His last paper in 1991 gives his affiliation as the National Research Council, Washington, D.C.

After 1964, no records for the New England Chapter have surfaced which detail any activities or board members for almost a decade. However, two other New England medical physics groups were well known to exist at this time: the Boston Medical Physics Group (BMPO) and the New England Radiological Physics Organization (NERPO). The relationship between these groups and the NEAAPM is somewhat unclear, though some members from this time period recall that all three groups co-existed though the NEAAPM was not very active at the time. In any case, it is likely that there was a significant overlap in membership. The BMPO is remembered primarily for holding monthly scientific meetings at the MIT faculty club. NERPO was founded as a collaborative venture inspired by an effort by the NE governors to facilitate regional collaboration. NERPO is best remembered for organizing a program of dosimetric comparisons between Boston area hospitals as well as those in New Hampshire and Maine.

While working as a physicist at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in New Hampshire, Edward (Ted) S. Sternick served on the executive board of NERPO starting in 1971. The years 1971-1972 the board began to discuss evolving NERPO and the BMPO into the New England Chapter of the AAPM. Ned was ultimately elected to serve as Chairman to the newly reconstituted NEAAPM board for 1974-1975. In addition to Ned as chair, the board consisted of Saul Aronow as secretary/treasurer, Bengt Björnård as AAPM board representative with John Cardarelli and Philip Judy as members at large.

All of these original members ultimately went on to have long distinguished careers in medical physics in the New England region. Ned Sternick left New Hampshire for Boston in 1978 to come to Tufts-New England Medical Center to serve as the Director of the Medical Physics Division. In 1981 the AAPM annual meeting was held in Boston and Ned served as chairman for the local arrangements. He was also elected to serve as AAPM president in 1984.

Bengt Björnård became the Director of Physics and Engineering group at the Joint Center for Radiation Therapy (JCTR) which was established in 1968 to provide radiation oncology services to four of the Harvard Medical School teaching hospitals. Bengt was elected to AAPM board in 1979. He would later be appointed a full Professor of Radiation Oncology at Harvard Medical School. Bengt recently passed away in January 2014.

One of the tasks before the 1974-1975 NEAAPM board was to update the original constitution. A letter from Ned Sternick to the members dated March 6, 1975 notes the hard work of Faridah Bagne, Joe Blinick, and Ken Wright at revising the constitution to make it more responsive to the professional, scientific, and educational needs of New England physicists. While no surviving copy of the 1975 constitution has been found, one obvious change of the new constitution was to redefine the officers of the board. The post of Chairman was replaced by President and the post of President-Elect was added. The 1976-1977 board consisted of Joseph Blinick as president and Saul Aronow as President Elect. Herb Moller filled the position of secretary/treasurer while Bengt Björnård remained on as national board representative. There is no record of other members-at-large. Other than that and the fact that secretary/treasurer was one position this is similar to the board structure that is used today.

1964 1st NEAAPM Constitution

The NEAAPM Today

As of 2016 the NEAAPM has nearly 300 members. The Chapter holds four major meetings a year of scientific and professional talks. The winter and fall meetings are half day and the summer meeting is a full day. These meetings all feature invited speakers from both inside and outside New England. Our Spring meeting is a young investigators symposium.

The NEAAPM Board at the 2014 Summer Meeting

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