The Congress of the International Association of Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women (IAPESGW) has been held every four years since 1953 and was hosted this year for the first time in Australia. Approximately 400 delegates from twenty-three countries attended the week-long Congress which provided the opportunity to review the latest research and developments in professional curricula relating to physical education and sport for girls and women. The theme of the Congress – ‘Moving Ahead in Changing Times’ – was designed to stimulate and enthuse participants to look beyond the difficulties and inequities faced by girls and women in physical education and sport and to seek strategies and solutions to the challenges faced by them.

The Congress format consisted of a plenary address each morning by a keynote speaker, followed by strand sessions on the six main areas of focus: physical education, aesthetics and dance, sport, recreation, health and fitness and sports medicine and sports science. Between six and eight papers were presented each day in each of the strands, providing a diversity of research interests and experiences. The physical education strand targeted issues in teaching and the challenges facing teachers of physical education in the future. Themes covered in the dance and aesthetics strand included the dance-making process, self image and appreciation of cultural differences. Social and cultural issues affecting participation were covered in the recreation strand as well as the recognition of women’s right to leisure and the role of leisure in the lives of girls and women. Within the sport strand, a range of initiatives were presented which aimed at encouraging girls and women of all ages and diverse cultures to incorporate sport into their lives. The sports medicine and sports science strand investigated the health and medical issues relating to women’s participation in sport in addition to providing educational material aimed at
improving the safety and enhancing the performance of all sportswomen. The health and fitness strand focussed on four areas: early development of active behaviour, adolescent images of health and activity, adult lifestyles and activity patterns and change in community attitudes towards equal opportunity for activity.

The plenary addresses provided an overview of key issues and concerns to be considered in each of the strands. In keeping with the theme of the Congress, each plenary address sought to stimulate discussion on strategies for positive future directions for women and girls in physical activity and sport in challenging and changing times. In what was a very full Congress program, this allowed participants to grapple with ideas from the six main areas of focus even though participation in each strand was not possible.

A recurring theme of the Congress was that women in sport should not create more barriers to restrict access and participation in sport and physical activity. They should instead learn to be supportive of each others’ endeavours in order to effectively overcome existing barriers. Elizabeth Darlison presented the keynote address at the opening ceremony and stressed that in order to ‘move ahead in changing times’ women needed to recognise and respect their differences and work together at achieving their common goal – improving the opportunities for women and girls in sport and physical activity.

It was suggested that there was no one approach to achieving equal access to sport and leisure for women. Rather, a variety of approaches, reflecting women’s diverse backgrounds and experiences and different sets of priorities were desirable. Social and cultural differences in race, class, age and sexual preference would produce different agendas for the attainment of equal opportunity in sport Aboriginal women, for example, might consider combating racism in sport as more important than specifically-targeted programs to increase participation amongst Aboriginal women and girls. Similarly for lesbians, raising awareness of homophobia in sport might take precedence over other issues. Criticism and fear of alternative approaches to a collective problem would create further fragmentation and a reduction in effectiveness.
Gertrude Pfister in her paper, ‘Her Story in Sport: Towards a Feminist Perspective?’, outlined the importance of women’s studies in sports history, to not only make the ‘forgotten women visible again’ but also to ‘play a part in exposing the myths of femininity’. Myths had been developed in the past to exclude women from participation in sport and physical activity. A women’s historical perspective also provided the opportunity to re-evaluate some of the developments in sport and assess their validity in respect of women’s issues. ‘Inventions such as tights, the “pill” or tampons have possibly had a greater impact on the physical culture of girls and women than the entry of sport into the age of the mass media ... which for a long time showed scant interest in women.’

Males dominate sport both in terms of quantity and by definition, what is considered sport and what is not. Pfister used an historical approach to demonstrate the various alternatives available to women to react to the male domination of sport, suggesting women could abstain, accept, integrate and even create alternative sport forms. The particular strategy adopted would depend on the positioning of the ‘nature’ of the two sexes ‘between the poles of equality and difference’. Liberal approaches would be pursued by those who believed in equality between the sexes, apart from some minor physical differences, whereas a ‘no change’ position, or a radical approach, would be adopted by those who saw the two sexes as fundamentally different.

By examining the lives of the present and two past presidents of IAPESGW, Pfister argued that ‘neither striving for equality or stressing the difference . . . seemed to offer a workable solution for women in the past’. Pfister suggested that the influence of post-structuralism might offer a solution to the ‘equality versus difference dilemma’. As such, Pfister stressed that ‘the differences between women, between traditions and conditions in individual countries as well as between sport systems and sport ideologies’ needed to be taken into account.

Barbara Drinkwater presented a sports medicine perspective on changing times in women’s sport. As opportunities became available for women to compete at elite level in sport, pressures and demands on athletes have increased leading to some questionable and indeed dangerous practices.
Drinkwater provided examples of the serious health consequences and medical complications associated with the unrealistic weight requirement or body fat percentages demanded of elite athletes, particularly those in athletics, gymnastics and dance. A consequence of this practice has been termed ‘The Female Athlete Triad: Eating disorders, amenorrhoea and osteoporosis’. Amenorrhoea is often a symptom of eating disorders in women, however, it also occurs as a result of intense physical training. The development of amenorrhoea almost certainly causes bone loss which leads to the risk of premature osteoporosis. Instead of maximising bone mass as a young adult to delay or prevent osteoporosis in the future, some young athletes are losing bone mass to the extent that their spinal density is similar to that of women in their 70s and 80s. Recent studies indicated that the premature bone loss may be irreversible. Interestingly, Drinkwater did not see the nature of sport or competition as the cause of this problem, rather the problem lay in the irresponsible and unethical practices, often employed by coaches, in training elite athletes. Additionally, little research had been conducted in the area of menstrual irregularities among women athletes and the need for continued research was stressed in order to find ‘the safest and most effective way of protecting women from premature bone loss during their amenorrheic periods’.

Cheryl Stock provided further evidence of the serious health consequences for athletes/performers at elite levels with examples from the Australian dance industry. Stock highlighted the unacceptably high level of injuries in dance training, quoting recent research which revealed that ‘52 percent of Australian dancers with chronic injuries are suffering from them by the time they reach 18 years of age. This figure jumps to 75 per cent by age 25’. Stock located the source of this problem in patriarchal society in which images of women are determined by men: women were to be submissive and decorative and in the case of dance, youthful, impossibly thin and waif-like.

Dance is dominated by women yet despite its immense and resurgent popularity it does not make a significant impact on society. Given the domination of dance by woman, Stock argued that the dance industry was in a position to have a ‘significant influence in the ongoing struggle to reflect the changing cultural context and image of dance’ and indeed, should be
responsible for initiating change. Stock called on those people who were creating alternative images of women, or those women who were in positions where they could potentially challenge the stereotypical images of women, whether that be in sport or in art, to ‘remain empowered to portray these alternatives publicly and predominantly at every opportunity’.

In the final keynote address Celia Brackenridge captured the theme of each of the plenary addresses stating that women needed to move ahead toward an agreed mission rather than moving as fragmented pieces in different directions and at different rates. Women in sport should acknowledge the political nature of sport, become politicised and recognise commonalities with the women’s rights movement. Women in sport had been successful ‘in sport’ but not ‘for women’. Rather than re-invent the wheel, women in sport should work through mainstream social movements in order to bring about change. For too long women in sport had isolated themselves from women’s community networks, concentrating instead on just sport. Women’s sport is, however, part of everyday life and change will occur more quickly once women in sport recognise that the inequalities faced by women in sport are a reflection of women’s oppression experienced in a patriarchal society. Issues in sport concerning access, equal opportunity, representation, both in decision-making and depiction in the media, equal remuneration, health and medical considerations were discussed in strand sessions. All such issues are demonstrated in the women’s movement ‘through struggles around women’s health and reproductive rights, women’s vote and a role in the decision-making process, women’s sexuality and the rights of self-determined gender, in education, employment and pay and in child care provision and benefits’. By connecting with social movements women would create a better chance of ‘securing both our rights in sport and our right to transform sport’.

In addition to the presentation of papers, dance performances from Korea, South Africa and Finland were performed in the morning sessions demonstrating the rich diversity of culture which could be portrayed in dance. An International Cultural and Dance Exchange was also performed which
provided the opportunity for both international and local dance groups to express aspects of their culture through dance. The high profile of dance at this Congress is indicative of the IAPESGW’s view of the importance of dance to women’s physical activity.

In what was a highly stimulating and interesting Congress which managed to break away from some of the traditional conservatism associated with sport, the only disappointing aspect, particularly in the Year of Indigenous People, was that there were no presentations concerning issues for Aboriginal girls and women in sport and physical activity. Apart from this aspect, the Congress successfully brought together people from throughout the world and demonstrated that high quality research and policy planning is being conducted to improve access to sport, leisure, recreation and physical education for women and girls, and more importantly, that feminist theory is being used to analyse the role that sport plays in the lives of women.