Two main causative factors can be identified when examining the origins of the “Graz Conference” on Medical Education, though in practice they are not always easy to separate: structural and personal.

Structural were the known deficits of the training of medical students in Austria: Long duration (9+ years), heavy on theory but lacking the practical skills necessary for the clinical demands of their next stage of training, no consensus – not even discussions – on the outcomes of the educational process among the faculty, no quality standards, an examination system that invited the learning/forgetting cycle and demanded no integration of the material learned, no training in communication skills, no attention to questions of student’s attitudes and other aspects of the demands of their future professional life, inadequate preparation for research, to name but a few.

Structural were also existing platforms of communication, which made the discussion of curricular issues possible: Each faculty had an elected curriculum committee (“Studienkommission”), which, however, focused on day-to-day issues and rarely looked at the over-all process. Neither was the Austrian central curriculum committee, the “Gesamtösterreichische Studienkommission” a useful driving force of change. Much more pertinent was another central structure, the “Medizinkommission der Bundeskonferenz des wissenschaftlichen und künstlerischen Personals (BUKO)”, which under the leadership of Kurt Grünental provided an effective discussion forum for all Austrian Medical Faculties and was also willing to examine educational issues. And then there was the Austrian Society for Didactics in Higher Education (ÖGHD), a private association but supported by public funds, which for a few years made curricular reform in medicine their focus of attention. Finally a German conference series organized by Florian Eitel (Munich) “Qualität der Lehre” (which later morphed into the GMA annual meetings) played a very important part, since it was fundamental in introducing modern educational concepts into the German speaking medical world. On the other hand the annual AMEE conference was on the whole successfully ignored.

Personal factors were initially mainly Jörg Stein, Gottfried Csanyi, and myself. Jörg and I met through BUKO and in many discussions discovered common interests. But our (chance!) encounters in 1992 and again 1994 at the conferences organised by Florian Eitel made us decide to plan a similar event in and for Austria. Thus the first Graz Conference in 1995 slowly took shape with the three of us contributing to all aspects of the event. But each of us left over the years a special mark: Gottfried
Csanyi of ÖGHD was instrumental in giving the conference an agreeable, yet useful, structure, making it an event for networking but also for getting real work done – our workshops deserved their name from the beginning! Jörg Stein contributed the name “Graz Conference” - he was at the time a faculty member in Graz. For many years (while the conference actually took place in Graz) he was responsible for the local organisation and established a remarkable high standard of hospitality (and also managed to raise the money necessary to support everything). Jörg also edited the printed program and thus provided a useful long-term record of the activities. Only many years later Herbert Plass took over this essential part of conference organization and raised it to a work of art. I myself stuck to the high road whenever I could: planning the scientific program of the events became more and more my main responsibility, though here I also had a lot of help.

Why did it continue? Apparently the conferences filled a real need. Here we formulated the ideas, which became the basis for the new medical curricula in Vienna, Graz, and Innsbruck. And here we were introduced to new didactic approaches (like PBL and Team based Learning) to new ideas about quality control (like evaluation), to new examination methods, and to new ideas in curriculum design (like learning outcomes).

A welcome change in the last years has been the move from an Austrian to an international event and the inclusion of Veterinary Medicine – hopefully Pharmacy will be next.