

Supporting laboratory medicine in low-income countries

On 28 May, the College held its first ever event focussed exclusively on developing countries. The event was a workshop attended by pathologists, scientists and other health professionals with experience in developing countries. The purpose of the workshop was to use participants' expertise to explore how the College could contribute to a nationally coordinated approach to supporting laboratory medicine in the developing world.

The workshop sessions centred on three questions concerning College support for laboratory medicine in poorer countries:

- What are the needs and guiding principles?
- What resources are available?
- What actions should the College take?

The participants worked in small groups, following brief 'scene setting' presentations by speakers from diverse backgrounds including the UK Department for International Development (Alison Beattie), Tropical Health and Education Trust (Pia McCrae), Voluntary Service Overseas (Clive Ingleby) and College Fellows currently managing activities in low-income countries. Results of the sessions are summarised below.

Opportunities and guiding principles

The College should match its areas of expertise to the needs of developing countries and focus on the areas of education, quality assurance, specialty training, career development and the generation of evidence to underpin laboratory services. Within the UK, there is no joined-up approach to laboratory medicine overseas yet good coordination is important to ensure complementarity and to advocate effectively for resources. This is an obvious role for the College.

Laboratory medicine in the UK is increasingly sub-specialised, whereas in many developing countries, laboratory professionals need to have broad-based skills. This emphasises the need for cultural awareness, and to ensure that the College's actions meet priority needs of the developing country by collaborating closely with local organisations.

There was a recognition that partnerships between laboratory clinicians and scientists, and a simultaneous 'top down' and 'bottom up' approach, are essential to effectively support laboratories in developing countries.

Availability of resources

There is clearly a strong commitment among individuals and organisations in the UK to support laboratory medicine in low-income countries, but this goodwill needs to be harnessed and coordinated. For individuals, the major constraint to spending time overseas is not funding, but a lack of consistent, formal mechanisms for taking time off work. Several schemes suitable for funding laboratory initiatives are available in the UK (e.g. International Health Links Programme, NHS endorsements, commercial companies) and elsewhere (e.g. European Union). Given the focus on education in many of the overseas laboratory activities, the College is well placed to host a core pool of resources for overseas teaching.

Next steps

The workshop participants identified several steps that could be taken by the College to demonstrate its commitment to supporting laboratory medicine in developing countries. Most of these steps, which include setting up a formal partnership with The Institute of Biomedical Science, advocating for accreditation and Trust support for time spent overseas, and influencing the laboratory medicine component of the UK's development agenda, do not require substantial funding. However, the most efficient way for the College to proceed would be to appoint a programme leader with a remit to obtain major funding for the programme and to take forward the recommendations from this workshop.

Workshop organising committee

Dr Imelda Bates (chair)

Professor Frank Carey

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