Bridging the Gap: The International Federation of Biosafety Associations

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In a Guest Editorial on these same pages during the summer of 2009, Chua et al. aptly identifies numerous timely and pressing challenges confronting the international biosafety community. These challenges include the ability of infectious diseases to spread globally due to international travel, the recent increase in the number of high- and maximum-containment laboratories around the world, and an insufficient number of national and regional biosafety associations. The authors proposed addressing these issues through a multi-pronged approach involving: outreach by existing biosafety associations; development of bilateral and multilateral international programs, supported by government agencies of multiple nations that focus on biological safety; and the establishment of an “International Biosafety Association” charged with consolidating resources and coordinating activities. The authors recommended that this International Biosafety Association be composed of national and regional biosafety associations from around the globe and that well established biosafety organizations work to mentor nascent or emerging biosafety organizations. Further, they suggested that all parties involved in these efforts acknowledge that common problems may require different solutions due to variances in engineering practices, the availability of equipment, and the availability of resources (both physical and financial) around the world. While these challenges and recommendations, in general, are not new to our biosafety awareness, the proposal to create a biosafety association representative of the global biosafety community couldn’t have come at a better time.

The International Federation of Biosafety Associations

The International Federation of Biosafety Associations (IFBA) has emerged as an international “association of biosafety associations” well positioned to facilitate discussions of, and identify solutions for, the numerous challenges on the international biosafety landscape. The organization was originally named the International Biosafety Working Group, and was founded in 2001. The first meeting was held in New Orleans, Louisiana at the 44th Annual Biosafety Conference of the American Biological Safety Association (ABSA) and involved 30 participants from 11 different countries representing nine different professional organizations, each of which possessed a written mandate or vested interest in biological safety. From this beginning the IFBA has become a non-profit organization registered in Manitoba, Canada consisting of 13 Member organizations and 13 Observer organizations collectively representing approximately 50 countries. IFBA leadership is comprised of committed biosafety professionals with a global experience base. This, combined with generous funding from the Global Partnership Program (Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Canada) and the support of a competent Secretariat (the International Centre for Infectious Diseases; Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada) the IFBA is on a trajectory for substantial growth and activity.

The IFBA officially meets on a biannual basis in conjunction with the Annual Meetings of ABSA and the European Biological Safety Association (EBSA). During these meetings, both Members and Observers participate in person or via Skype to work together on biosafety and biosecurity issues related to guidelines, training, education, and outreach. They provide updates on their respective organization’s current activities and participate in discussions regarding IFBA current and future activities. Anyone with an interest in biosafety is welcome to attend these meetings as a Guest, although only Member organizations are permitted to vote. The IFBA is co-chaired by two elected Member representatives who serve for staggered terms of 2 years. Each is from a different country and a different Member organization. Current Co-Chairs are Dr. Leila Oda (President of ANBio, Brazil) and Dr. Steven Theriault (representative of ABSA Canada).

IFBA Members and Observers are global ambassadors for biosafety and biosecurity best practices. Via the organization’s web site, the IFBA openly shares resources and instructional material not only to increase the global body of knowledge on these topics, but also to ensure its worldwide dissemination among individuals and organizations not formally represented by a society of biosafety professionals. These resources include links to Material Safety Data Sheets for microorganisms as well as a large, online collection of biosafety and biosecurity regulatory and guidance documents related to research, production, biosafety and biosecurity program management, and containment laboratory design/construction. These regulatory and guidance documents were created by biosafety professionals representing a wide variety of countries, jurisdictions, and

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international organizations. The result is the “Biosafety Compendium,” an online searchable database. The content of the Compendium increases continually as IFBA Members and Observers provide new and updated materials. In addition to the Compendium, the IFBA web site includes video instruction and training DVDs developed by the Public Health Agency of Canada, as well as original training presentations and curricula from international biosafety workshops sponsored by the Global Partnership Program. Many of the Compendium documents and video training materials are available in English and Russian language formats. The IFBA web site also maintains current links to professional development opportunities such as upcoming conferences, meetings, workshops, and professional training events presented by various federal, commercial, and not-for-profit organizations.

Over the past several years, IFBA representatives have shared information, perspective, and opinion on biosafety best practices with other international organizations including the World Health Organization and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Representatives of the IFBA were actively involved in the development of CEN (Comité Européen de Normalisation) Workshop Agreement (CWA) CEN 15793:2008 “International Biorisk Management Standard” and are currently participating in CEN Workshop 53 “Biosafety Professional Competence” and CEN Workshop 55 “Guidance Document for CWA 15793:2008 Laboratory Biorisk Management Standard.” Thanks to funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Canada and the Global Partnership Program, the CWA 15793:2008 is available for free download at: ftp://ftp.cenorm.be/PUBLIC/CWAs/workshop31/

To assist individual biosafety professionals, as well as biosafety organizations that desire support, the IFBA maintains a “Mentoring and Twinning” program. Whether affiliated with an IFBA Member organization or not, an individual can request professional mentoring support by completing an online application. A “mentee” is paired with a mentor possessing the requisite expertise (e.g., scientific, language). To become formally established and maintain momentum, developing or emerging biosafety organizations may request “twinning” (or pairing) with an IFBA Member organization. The “twinning” of organizations typically occurs with geographical and cultural considerations in mind. Most recently, the Biosafety Association of Central Asia and the Caucasus was twinned with the Asia Pacific Biosafety Association. In some instances, the IFBA senior leadership and Secretariat reach out directly to emerging and nascent biosafety organizations to provide encouragement, support, and technical resources as they begin to organize and structure themselves into formal associations. Most recently, the IFBA worked with representatives from Africa, Morocco, and South American countries to help them create the framework to establish their organizations.

Global Biosafety and Biosecurity: Taking Action

How best to address the spread of infectious diseases and to ensure the safe handling and secure storage of pathogens in laboratories is a matter of much debate. Gaining consensus is complicated by the fact that solutions that work for one nation may not work well for others due to varying funding priorities, limited resources, absences of regulatory framework, and, sometimes, ignorance of the risks. However, it is abundantly clear that vulnerabilities in one nation present risks to all of us. Consequently, we must all work together to create processes that yield outcomes which are simultaneously achievable, feasible, and sustainable over the long term. To accomplish this, it is essential to bring a wide range of individuals from all regions of the world into the conversation—scientists, policy makers, senior-level government officials, and international assistance program directors—to set priorities and make firm commitments. This is the only approach by which the global biosafety community can begin to gain traction and make measurable progress regarding these under-funded and under-addressed issues.

The IFBA is the organization that bridges the gap. In 2011, the IFBA will assemble a forum in Bangkok, Thailand entitled “Global Biosafety and Biosecurity: Taking Action” at which invitees will discuss these critical issues and make firm commitments to fund and execute solutions for these problems. This activity is not intended to draw away participation or limited funding from other national or regional biosafety association events or to compete with the activities of international assistance programs and non-governmental organizations working on matters of biosafety and biosecurity. Instead, the purpose of the event is threefold: (1) to educate policy makers about matters of biosafety and biosecurity; (2) to develop a clear vision and plan of action to address the identified challenges; and (3) to secure commitments from senior-level government officials to implement a plan of action for each region.

By bringing the decision makers and funding organizations to the same table and ensuring that all parties work with the awareness that one size does not fit all, the IFBA will serve as the organization that bridges the gap between where we find ourselves today and where we need to be tomorrow. For more information on the IFBA or to contact the Co-Chairs, please visit the web site at: www.internationalbiosafety.org/english/index.asp

Disclosure

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References


http://nccphp.sph.unc.edu/training/index.php

North Carolina Center for Public Health Preparedness Training Web Site

This site offers free short Internet-based trainings developed by the North Carolina Center for Public Health Preparedness (NCCPHP) on public health preparedness topics such as disease surveillance, basic epidemiology, bioterrorism and new/emerging disease agents.

Trainings address emergency readiness competencies plus core public health and epidemiology competencies. Free continuing education credits (CEUs) for trainings are available. More information on receiving CEUs is available on the cover page of each training.

ICS in Action: Using the Incident Command System in Public Health Outbreak Investigations

Fee: none
Length: 2-1/2 hours
http://nccphp.sph.unc.edu/training/HEP_ICSPH/certificate.php

Competencies Addressed

This training addresses selected applied epidemiology, core public health, and emergency preparedness and response competencies as noted below. (Please note: The following training does not provide comprehensive or in-depth treatment of specified competencies, it provides basic knowledge of the competencies listed below.)

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<tr>
<th><strong>Applied Epidemiology Competencies Tier 1</strong></th>
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<td>Recognize the existence of a public health problem (I.A.1)</td>
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<td>Collaborate with others inside and outside the agency to identify the problem (I.A.3)</td>
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<th><strong>Bioterrorism &amp; Emergency Readiness Competencies For All Public Health Workers</strong></th>
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<td>2. Describe the chain of command in emergency response.</td>
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<td>4. Describe his/her functional role(s) in emergency response and demonstrate his/her role(s) in regular drills.</td>
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<td>6. Describe communication role(s) in emergency response: ( within the agency using established communication systems; with the media; with the general public and personal (with family, neighbors)</td>
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