Society News

Inaugural Conference of the Sri Lankan Society for Microbiology

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The Sri Lankan Society for Microbiology (SSM) held its Inaugural Conference on 25th June 2012 at the University of Peradeniya. A series of events over the preceding week culminated in the conference which was attended by 75 registrants from a wide variety of disciplines.

The first event was a Roundtable on Public Health which brought together researchers in human and veterinary medicine, epidemiologists and community health physicians. The aim of the roundtable was to share information on common infectious diseases that pose a threat to public health in Sri Lanka, to discuss constraints in surveillance and in particular, the avenues for laboratory confirmation of infections and to spearhead a coordinated approach to policy makers to influence public health strategies. The roundtable was followed by a role play where groups of individuals from diverse backgrounds were challenged to address a public health emergency while learning to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the team and the need for coopting additional expertise.

This was followed by a workshop on "Writing for microbiology peer-reviewed journals" conducted by Professor Tim Inglis, Professor at the School of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, University of Western Australia and Medical Microbiologist at the Department of Microbiology, PathWest Laboratory Medicine, Western Australia. A large number of postgraduate students benefitted greatly from the workshop which discussed the effective transformation of research data into a paper suitable for publication. Prof Inglis explained that the author should first convert the raw data into results and analyze them for significance and common themes. The results should be discussed, starting with their connection to previous work done on the topic (as outlined in the introduction) and clearly demonstrate the new contribution to knowledge. Once the results are discussed, a summary of the main ideas put forward in the discussion could be provided as a conclusion. The insight into converting data into results and using the ideas brought up by the results to generate the discussion was new to many of the participants.

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A two day workshop on the "Use of molecular methods for the diagnosis of emerging infectious diseases" conducted by Prof Inglis and Dr Barry Mendelawitz of "Lab Without Walls" demonstrated deployable molecular diagnostics for many common tropical infections. Rapid detection of common Gram positive and Gram negative bacteria from blood cultures, detection of arboviruses in patient specimens and in mosquitos and detection of leptospira, rickettsiae, *Burkholderia* and *Plasmodium* spp. in clinical samples were demonstrated. Although the initial aim of the workshop which was to demonstrate the use of real time PCR had to be aborted due to malfunction of the machine, the workshop continued, using conventional PCR and visualizing the amplified products using ©Bioanalyzer chip-based electrophoresis.

The Inaugural Conference was addressed by an interesting array of speakers whose topics were supplemented by a display of posters of research conducted in Sri Lanka relevant to each topic. The two main themes were "Antimicrobials and Infection" and "Vector-borne and Zoonotic diseases". The participants were from many areas including medicine, veterinary science, complementary medicine, epidemiology etc. The Guest Speaker was Prof Tim Inglis who spoke on "An integrated systems biology perspective on severe sepsis".

The SSM hopes that this conference will be an annual event in its calendar and foster the interaction of scientists from the many branches of science that have an interest in microbes.