

Networking in International Health: Introducing the Federation of European Societies for Tropical Medicine and International Health (FESTMIH)

Introduction

In November 2004, the annual colloquium of the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Antwerp was held on 'Networking the Networks'. For 3 days we discussed 'the art of networking' and at the end we concluded that a successful network is one whose members share a common goal, which is built upon trust and effectively organized to fulfil the goals formulated in a mission statement and work plans. Another important conclusion was that establishing a well-functioning network takes time. A network which celebrates its 10th anniversary this year is the Federation of European Societies for Tropical Medicine and International Health (FESTMIH). After a decade, it is time to take stock of achievements and to present future plans.

Mission

The Federation was founded in 1995 in Hamburg, during the first European Conference on Tropical Medicine. The network's primary objective was to facilitate the organization of European Congresses on Tropical Medicine and International Health. By joining forces, it was expected to expand the scale of these events and to enable national societies to participate in the organization of international meetings. The Federation's second aim was to foster European collaboration and North-South partnerships for health development in the tropics. FESTMIH also had the vision of promoting and supporting harmonization of health strategies and recommendations related to developing countries, emergency situations and international travellers. Furthermore, FESTMIH wanted to encourage European harmonization of training in tropical medicine and international health. The Federation also wanted to promote the collaboration with relevant international organizations and agencies, and seek affiliation when appropriate. Building upon existing research endeavours, the Federation would encourage and support research networks, particularly with institutions in developing countries.

Organizational structure

A Board of Directors runs the Federation, according to a work plan approved by the General Assembly. The General Assembly convenes every other year, next during the Congress in Marseille; it consists of delegates nominated by each member society. The board consists of a President, a Vice-President, a Secretary, a Treasurer and not more than three additional members.

Over the past decade, the Federation developed into an extended network of national societies. Fifteen European countries are currently represented on the Federation Council by their respective national societies. Overseas societies are welcomed as corresponding members. Member societies comprise Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. Increasingly, FESTMIH actively fosters the formation of new national societies within Europe, especially in the new member states of the European Union. FESTMIH also promotes the formation of new scientific societies in the tropics dealing with health sciences. The Federation establishes links with societies pursuing similar objectives in developing countries.

Activities

In September this year, FESTMIH is co-organizer of the Fourth European Congress on Tropical Medicine and International Health. The Congress *Medicine and Health in the Tropics* will be held from the 11th to the 15th in Marseille (for more information: <http://www.iftm-pharo2005.org>). Like the former conferences, this event deals with typical tropical medicine issues such as malaria and other parasitic diseases, AIDS, tuberculosis and other infectious diseases. A substantial part of the programme is dedicated to the social, cultural and economic problems specific to health in the tropics in the 21st century. The impact of conflicts on health also is an important topic, as is travel medicine.

FESTMIH has already facilitated three successful conferences: in Hamburg (1995), in Liverpool (1998)

and in Lisbon (2002). Besides the organization of congresses, FESTMIH actively simulates the interaction between member societies and responds to specific requests. The website (<http://www.festmih.net>) functions as a linchpin between the members. Other activities include the monitoring of developments in international health and the sponsorship of activities in the interest of tropical medicine and international health.

Future activities

After a period of consolidation of organizing congresses, we feel that it is time to broaden the network's horizon. The Federation is promoting membership for Poland and the Baltic States, aiming to expand its role of European

platform. We intend to stimulate interaction and dialogue among its members; agenda setting and advocacy for key issues in tropical medicine and international health remain core activities. We invite all member societies to actively participate in the discussions and to attend the next General Assembly. Societies with an interest in or connection to tropical medicine and international health throughout the European Region who are not members are warmly welcomed to join us.

For more information, suggestions or comments, please contact Martin Boeree (President) at m.boeree@ulc.umcn.nl or visit our website (<http://www.festmih.net>).

Martin Boeree, President of FESTMIH
Esther Jurgens, Consultant to the Board

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