

COMMENTARY ON THE AFRICAN BIOLOGICAL SAFETY ASSOCIATION INAUGURAL MEETING: 8–12 MARCH 2010

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The African Biological Safety Association (AfBSA) held its inaugural meeting in Nairobi, Kenya on 8–12 March 2010. The association was the result of an initiative by Willy Tonui of the Kenya Medical Research Institute and the conference was sponsored by the US Biosecurity Engagement Program. The meeting consisted of three days of pre-conference courses followed by a two-day conference.

The pre-conference courses covered a number of different topics, from biorisk assessment and working with zoonotic pathogens, to waste management and transport of infectious materials. The courses were instructed by staff from the Sandia National Laboratories and the Centers for Disease Control, both of the USA. All of the courses were very interactive and focused on dialogue and involvement between the participants. The opportunity to experience innovative, hands-on training allowed the participants to maximise their exposure to the topic and to interact with the trainers, as well as to exchange experiences with the other participants. By offering a range of different topics in the pre-conference workshops, the organisers allowed participants to tailor their selection according to the needs of their individual institutions. Furthermore, a number of these pre-conference courses allowed participants to receive international certification in areas such as transport of infectious materials, thus providing a valuable asset to their home institutions.

The conference itself covered a range of topics related to biosafety. Many of the presentations covered the challenges of conducting research in resource limited settings. The theoretical presentations were interspersed by personal experiences from researchers from Gabon and Kenya regarding working with infectious diseases. Biosecurity issues were also addressed in some presentations, including those of laboratory design, personnel training and dual-use issues. Other presentations featured detailed accounts of various biosafety and biosecurity education courses, including those from Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya, Mali and Uganda.

The AfBSA hopes to become a pan-African institution, providing a means of communication, support and standardisation between national biosafety and biosecurity associations. By operating as a centralised body to facilitate discussion and sharing of resources and information, AfBSA has the potential to play an important role in the development of African science.

The conference was attended by 150 delegates from 28 African countries, as well as by a small number of international delegates from networks such as the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the European Biosafety Association. The University of Exeter was also represented through their involvement in dual-use research.

South Africa, however, was not represented at this meeting. As one of the strongest nations on the African continent in the fields of scientific research, South African scientists are in a position to contribute significantly to the development of the AfBSA. This society has the potential to create a strong network of support for biosafety and biosecurity issues in Africa, which will be beneficial in the further development of African life sciences research. It is therefore important for the South African science community to support such a valuable initiative. ■