



Banking biological samples



Doctors and scientists have for many years kept collections of biological samples. In recent years, developments in genomic research have led to renewed interest in building up collections of human biological samples – or ‘biobanks’ as they are known – together with personal information (such as medical history and lifestyle details) about the individuals providing these samples. It is hoped that research made possible by such biobanks will provide valuable knowledge in the fights against cancer, diabetes, and other debilitating diseases.

At the same time, practices of biobanking raise a number of ethical challenges concerning, for example, participating individuals’ trust, confidentiality regarding their personal information and the question of who should benefit from commercial gains arising from genomic research.

From 27-30 April 2009, around 60 scientists, social scientists, ethicists and clinicians from Europe and China gathered in Shenzhen for a workshop on the ethics of genomic research and biobanking. Speakers discussed ways to establish best practice to ensure biological sample donors’ informed consent, quality control of samples when collected and good storage practices of the samples as well as way to protect privacy of personal information on electronic databases.

‘In the future, genomic studies will require many more biological samples and this raises a number of ethical challenges. It is only through international collaboration that we can, not only work more efficiently, but also address ethical issues more effectively’, said host of the BIONET workshop, Dr Yang Huanming from the Beijing Genomics Institute – Shenzhen.

‘With biobanking, we have the opportunity to organise issues of ethical governance while this new technology is developing, rather than after’, said Dr Ole Doering, BIONET partner and co-organiser of the Shenzhen workshop.

A complete workshop report is available at www.bionet-china.org

Challenges and Future Perspectives

BIONET’s final conference will take place from the 2-4 September 2009. Over the last three years, the BIONET project has held workshops and conferences in Beijing, Shanghai, Changsha, Xi’an and Shenzhen on the topics of reproductive medicine, stem cell research, clinical trials and biobanks. The goal has been to map out and identify some of the key ethical challenges in these fields, especially as these relate to research collaborations between Chinese and European scientists.

In September around 100 participants will gather in London to reflect on BIONET’s findings with keynote addresses from leading scientists, Ministry officials, Research councils as well as ethics committee members from both China and Europe.

The conference will examine emerging patterns of scientific cooperation between two major players in the fields of contemporary life sciences and biomedicine – Europe and China.

The key objectives of the conference are to:

- share the findings of the BIONET project in the fields of stem cell research, clinical trials and genomic research
- present a set of recommendations for best practice in the ethical governance of research collaborations in biological and biomedical research between Chinese and European scientists
- get feedback and inputs as to how we might proceed in order to ensure that ethical governance issues are constructively and effectively integrated into global biological and biomedical research collaborations.

Further to the European Commission’s Sixth Framework Programme, the conference is also supported by the United Kingdom’s Medical Research Council and the Wellcome Trust. There are a limited number of delegate spaces still open. Interested persons should contact Dr. Ayo Wahlberg (a.j.wahlberg@lse.ac.uk).



Stakeholder meeting planned for Beijing in 2010

As the initial 3 year BIONET project draws to a close, plans are already being made to see how momentum can be maintained. The BIONET Expert Group has proposed to continue dissemination efforts in 2010 by organising a stakeholder meeting with key policy officials, research council members and scientists in China. The Expert Group will present a set of key recommendations for best practice in the ethical governance of research collaborations in biological and biomedical research between Chinese and European scientists at the final BIONET conference in London. They will outline a number of issues around ethical review, informed consent and benefit-sharing which should be considered before research collaborations in the fields of stem cell research, clinical trials and biobanking are initiated.



BIONET workshop and conference reports

All BIONET workshop and conference reports are now available for download from www.bionet-china.org/publications.htm



Beijing Reproductive Medicine workshop



Xi'an Clinical Trials workshop



Shanghai Stem Cell Research workshop



Shenzhen Biobanking workshop

Student Exchanges

In BIONET's 3rd year, a further five postgraduate students were awarded BIONET student stipends to help them in carrying out cross-cultural research into social and ethical implications of biological and biomedical research. Sui Suli travelled to the United Kingdom to study practices of genetic counselling; Megan Allyse travelled to China to interview key policy persons in the biological and biomedical research field; Ginny He travelled to Denmark to study practices of embryo donation and psycho-social counselling of IVF patients; Su Yeyang travelled to many European countries to study the ethical implications of genomics research; and Achim Rosemann will travel to China to study human subjects research in the field of regenerative medicine. BIONET students will participate and present at BIONET's final conference and a report on their findings is currently being prepared.



Changsha Regenerative Medicine workshop



Reporting Bioethics workshop