



SCA·H·L·S

NEWSLETTER

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SUB-COMMITTEE ON ANIMAL HEALTH LABORATORY STANDARDS

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SCAHLs Stakeholder Survey

If you work in a University Laboratory and are reading this Newsletter, our communication system is working! However, the majority of your colleagues may not be so lucky, may even be unaware of SCAHLs' existence and almost certainly unaware of SCAHLs' activities. Our recent survey of stakeholders yielded few responses from University colleagues and those who did respond had not heard of SCAHLs until the survey form was thrust into their hands. It seems the links between SCAHLs and stakeholders at the bench are easily broken.

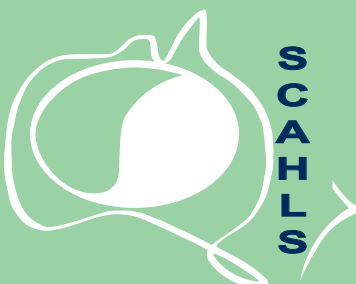
Newsletters are issued twice a year by email to known stakeholders. They include items of interest to all laboratory diagnosticians, e.g. news on Australian Association of Veterinary Laboratory Diagnosticians (AAVLD) activities,

test validation methods and templates, outsourcing tests overseas, new standard protocols (Australia New Zealand Standard Diagnostic Procedures), coming SCAHLs workshops and emergency animal disease laboratory preparedness.

To secure a copy of the SCAHLs Newsletter directly into your inbox, please email a request to the SCAHLs Executive Officer (Jill Birrell) at JBirrell@agric.wa.gov.au. If you have received this Newsletter by email, please display a paper copy or circulate it by email so that your colleagues may be equally well informed. University stakeholders should also know that you now have a representative on the committee – he is Dr Glen Browning of Melbourne University. If you have issues you would like to present to the committee, contact Glen at glenfb@unimelb.edu.au.

Equine Influenza (EI) Publications

As Australia recovers from a major outbreak of EI, many are preparing communications on the outbreak itself, on the lessons learnt and on ways to prevent such an outbreak in the future. In an attempt to ensure all those involved get the appropriate level of credit and to further ensure consistency in the facts themselves, the Consultative Committee for Emergency Animal Diseases (CCEAD) has established a working group to provide an appropriate framework for publications and presentations. It is agreed that a special edition of the Australian Veterinary Journal will capture most of the scientific publications dealing with the outbreak. A detailed paper outlining the actual outbreak will be specifically commissioned to capture the most salient chronological facts. It is also envisaged that a book will be commissioned to provide a full account. Finally a record is being compiled of oral presentations by those involved in the outbreak, again to ensure consistency in the details given but also to share presentation material.



New Test Evaluation Update

SCAHLs has a mandate to facilitate the development and adoption of new diagnostic methods. To achieve this, the New Test Evaluation Working Group coordinates the independent evaluation of new test methodologies and validation data. New test dossiers are peer-reviewed by SCAHLs members and independent scientific experts.

Validation dossiers can be submitted using the templates available on the SCAHLs web site (www.scahls.org.au) These are designed to accommodate serological and PCR based tests, but are readily adapted for other methods.

SCAHLs expects test developers to seek approval for new tests applicable to:

National disease control, eradication and surveillance programs, health certification testing (for livestock destined for international export), and tests developed for exotic disease diagnosis that are required to be transferred to other laboratories.

It is recognised by SCAHLs that there are 5 stages in the validation process as outlined by the OIE. These include:

1. Feasibility
2. Development and standardisation
3. Assay performance characterisation
4. Monitoring performance (including transferability – tested in another lab)
5. Maintenance/extended validation criteria

A test that differs in principle from an established test must be evaluated by SCAHLs before its inclusion in the appropriate ANZSDP. The usual fee for review of assays is A\$3000, and reviews are usually completed in three to six months following payment of the SCAHLs invoice. Working group requests to submitters for additional information will 'stop the clock'. These include requests to provide data that may be missing or, to clarify aspects of the validation dossier.

At the most recent meeting of SCAHLs in March 2008, consideration was given to the approval of new assays that may be seen as 'extensions' of existing methods. For example, these could include minor changes that would not be expected to materially affect the performance of the assay. SCAHLs agreed that such extensions are possible, and would be considered on a case by case basis. If accepted for consideration as an extension, a fee of A\$2000 would apply.

A template for extensions can be found on the SCAHLs website.

Loss of laboratory skills

In recent times there has been a gradual decline of most veterinary laboratory skills due to an aging work force and a lack of training opportunities. A training scheme to address some of the shortages of veterinary laboratory specialists is currently being investigated by a working group comprising stakeholders and the various universities. However, this training initiative will be of little value unless satisfactory career paths are available for those who complete the proposed training. The situation is critical for parasitology with few trained experts and many jurisdictions unwilling to fund positions even though parasitological diseases have a major economic impact on Australia's animal industries. At its recent meeting SCAHLs was concerned at the trend of decreasing funding for some specialities and highlighted the need to provide long term career pathways to encourage more graduates to pursue careers in the veterinary laboratory network.

New Test Register

For a number of years now SCAHLs has produced a New Test Register which is available on the SCAHLs website (www.scahls.org.au). This contains a list of laboratory tests that are being developed and validated at Australian and New Zealand Animal Health Laboratories. Currently the register only contains tests being developed by state, territory and commonwealth laboratories but it is hoped to include those being developed by universities and private laboratories in the future.

A number of these tests, once fully validated, will be submitted for approval by SCAHLs and for inclusion in the Australian and New Zealand Standard Diagnostic Protocols (ANZSDPs) for specific diseases.

The purpose of maintaining this register is to enable laboratory scientists and researchers to see what tests other Australian and New Zealand laboratories and organisations are currently working on and validating. This should then allow contact to be made and collaborations started between laboratories working on the same diseases and tests.

Often, in the past, several laboratories could be developing the same test and thus unnecessarily duplicating the considerable amount of work and money required to fully validate a test. It is hoped that, before embarking on the development of a new test, researchers would check the register to see if the work has already being done elsewhere and, if so, whether the technology, methods or reagents can be transferred to their laboratory.

Changes at AAHL.

During the past two years, considerable investments have been made at AAHL resulting in a number of key changes and the appointment of some 30 additional staff. Initially, \$24 million was provided by CSIRO to upgrade the engineering components of AAHL. This was followed by a further \$5 million of CSIRO/DAFF investment in a new Diagnostic Emergency Response Laboratory (DERL) specially designed to enable an effective response to a Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak and building on the lessons learnt by the Pirbright Laboratory in the 2001 UK outbreak. DERL will be opened in July 2008. In 2007, AAHL was awarded \$8.2 million under the National Collaborative Research Infra-structure Strategy (NCRIS) to provide an additional 2,0000 square metres of laboratory space at AAHL for use by non-CSIRO scientists and this was augmented by a further \$3.5 million from NCRIS to incorporate AAHL into a national microscopy network. Finally, in 2007 an additional \$16.7 million was awarded to AAHL for operational activities by the Commonwealth Government, spread over 4 years. These funds will underpin many of the new appointments at AAHL. Clearly, this now places AAHL in an excellent position to respond to the heightened threat from infectious diseases to our livestock, to man and to the environment.

EAD Evolving Diagnostic Network Workshop.

Since the opening of the Australian Animal Health Laboratory (AAHL) in 1987, the laboratory diagnosis of an exotic animal disease has been the responsibility of AAHL. This has involved not only the actual diagnosis but clear procedures for reporting and for maintaining the response capacity. However, with both Avian and Equine Influenza, the implementation of these previously agreed procedures has been modified. Changes in the risk framework (e.g. exotic diseases versus endemic, new or emerging diseases), developments in laboratory technologies (e.g. molecular based assays) and the challenges to the effective implementation of the agreed procedures (e.g. transport delays in sample submission to AAHL) have indicated the need to re-examine Australia's approach to the diagnosis and laboratory response to an EAD event. This coincides with similar changes being considered in both the USA and Canada. At the last meeting of the Animal Health Committee, SCAHLS was asked to describe how such a Network approach to the laboratory diagnosis of an EAD might operate and the policy changes needed to support that approach. In order to consider the concept, SCAHLS held a workshop after its March 2008 meeting in Geelong. The outcome of the workshop is a paper to be submitted at the next AHC meeting in September 2008. Whilst there are many aspects to this Network approach, there was unanimous agreement that communication is the key to success. It was proposed that a laboratory taskforce, consisting of senior laboratory professionals, would meet frequently during an EAD outbreak to ensure agreement and transparency in the operation of the Network – similar in operation to the CCEAD.

Veterinary Pathology Pilot Project

'Shared workspaces' will be the way of the future according to the team developing the Australian Biosecurity Intelligence Network (ABIN). The workspace in question will be electronic and the information to be shared is about people, databases, activities and interactions. The degree of involvement is entirely up to the user – in other words, you need to sign up to be a part of it, but engagement in your interest area is entirely optional. This is a Federal Government initiative (a part of the National Cooperative Research Infrastructure Strategy, or NCRIS) intended to maximise the use of available biosecurity information and expertise across the country and across sectors.

Development of ABIN will be a carefully staged process. To launch the concept there will be a number of pilot projects, including one in veterinary pathology, that will be of interest to the laboratory network. The other projects are: emerging influenza, fruit fly, salmonella, arboviruses, aquatic animal health, wildlife and multi-drug resistant tuberculosis. ABIN will be managed through a Board and a CEO, both of which will be appointed during 2008. SCAHLS has a particular interest in the veterinary pathology project because it has the potential to intersect with the existing Australian Animal Pathology Standards Program (AAPSP) and the proposed National Training Scheme for laboratory specialists. Watch this space for further news.