Preface: Sustained cooperation on research and control of neglected tropical diseases among multisectors and multipartners across borders in Southeast Asia

Abstract

This special issue is going to introduce the origins of the "Regional Network on Asian Schistosomiasis (RNAS)" which can be traced back to 1996. RNAS was originally a collaboration of scientists from China and Philippines, and then expanded to Cambodia, Indonesia, Japan and Laos, with focusing on research and control of schistosomiasis japonica. However, at its fifth meeting in Bali, Indonesia in 2005, more countries such as Vietnam, Thailand and Korea were brought on board along with a string of neglected tropical diseases such as cysticercosis, clonorchiasis, opisthorchiasis and fascioliasis, and RNAS thus became RNAS^{+}. We all expected that the progress made so far will be enough to persuade donors to assist RNAS^{+} in its current activities and forward movement.

The origins of the "Regional Network on Asian Schistosomiasis (RNAS)" can be traced back to a discussion during a 1996 workshop in Nanjing, China. This meeting, "Research, Surveillance and Control of Schistosomiasis Japonica", sponsored by the UNICEF/UNDP/World Bank/WHO Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (TDR) initiated the idea of a network taking the shape of a bid to coral stakeholders to step up the fight against schistosomiasis japonica in Southeast Asia.

Research on schistosomiasis has a long tradition in China and the Philippines, the two countries in the region with the largest burdens of the disease. Operational research has always been an important component of their national control programmes which have both contributed to past successes in reducing the impact of schistosomiasis. The 1980s saw the beginning of a multidisciplinary approach made possible with input from TDR, the Rockefeller Foundation and the creation of Tropical Medicine Research Centers (TMRC) with grants from the US National Institutes of Health. This fostered strong collaboration between national research institutes and research groups within and outside the region including countries as far away as Australia, UK and USA. The role played by the World Bank is particularly pivotal by focusing activities on control which initially

led to a dramatic drop in prevalence of the disease in both countries, but the final outcome was different in China and the Philippines. While the Bank initiated work in the Philippines already in the 1980s fully concentrating on supporting the control programme, about 3% of the 10-year total World Bank Loan Project (WBLP) in China (1991–2000) was set aside for research. It should be added that the WBLP, including matching funds from the Chinese Government, amounted to more than 80 million US dollars and, at the time, constituted the biggest project undertaken for any parasitic disease. Importantly, research benefitted handsomely and produced breakthroughs in many areas resulting in testing of new strategies, progress on vaccine and drug development and initiation of the use of Geographical Information Systems (GIS). While the time after the World Bank input, prevalence surveys have become irregular in the Philippines and mostly limited to highly endemic areas, China has been able to sustain a country-wide control programme and largely kept prevalence from rising. Naturally, the current improvements in the Chinese economy are an important factor, but the role played by WBLP research component should not be underestimated.

RNAS was originally a collaboration of scientists from Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos and the Philippines exclusively focused on research, surveillance and control of schistosomiasis japonica. However, at its fifth meeting in Bali, Indonesia in 2005 the number of participants had grown substantially and a strong need was felt to also do something for the other neglected diseases in the region. The network had chalked up an impressive number of accomplishments and started to make a sustained impact on the research and control of schistosomiasis. The challenges were discussed with a view to find the best possible future direction. The knowledge that the network was widely seen as a model for other initiatives encouraged the view that the RNAS vision should expand and accommodate other neglected parasitic diseases and new member countries. Henceforth, Vietnam, Thailand and Korea were brought onboard along with a string of endemic diseases such as cysticercosis, clonorchiasis, opisthorchiasis and fascioliasis, and RNAS thus became RNAS^{+}.

The progress and new developments were clearly at hand in the follow-up meeting in the historic city of Lijiang, China in 2007, which attracted 150 participants from 19 countries and international organizations. The form of this meeting was an open forum exchanging information on the various diseases in the different countries and regions with the aim of sharing documentation and conclusions with regional Ministries of Health to enable

more effective research, treatment and disease control. RNAS$^+$ is now at an important juncture. It is faced with a situation where we have the means to control many of the different target diseases, but this asks for immediate, strong action, both with regard to research and control. The ideas, along which we have been working over the last decade, have shown that progress can be made with a relatively small network and limited funding. However, the stakes have increased and the larger vision demands improved financial support to permit a continuous exchange of ideas and data to make it possible for national researchers and control managers to work together and be in contact with international scientists on a daily basis. This goal is being achieved thanks to modern computers and continuous Internet access. It is hoped that the progress made so far, evidenced by the papers presented here, will be enough to persuade donors to assist RNAS$^+$ in its current activities and forward movement.

For more information on The Regional Network for Research, Surveillance and Control for Asian Schistosomiasis (RNAS) access rnas.ipd.org.cn

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