

## **Indo-German Science Centre for Infectious Diseases (IG-SCID): A Virtual Centre**

The collaboration between India and Germany in health sector has been a strong focus during the last 60 years of diplomatic relationship between India and Germany. The cooperation between Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and Helmholtz Association (HGF), Germany started with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on April 24, 2006 at Hannover, Germany by Prof. N. K. Ganguly, former Director-General, ICMR and Prof. J. Mlynek, President, HGF during the visit by Hon'ble Prime Minister of India to Germany. This cooperation in medical research has identified infectious diseases, oncology, and biomedical research related to health as the areas of collaboration.

The infectious diseases impose a heavy health burden in India and Germany. Therefore, in July, 2006 the various topics under infectious diseases were identified as a research priority by the two implementing agencies viz. the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) in India and Helmholtz Centre for Infection Research (HZI) in Germany. Under the aegis of the MoU, a virtual Indo-German Science Centre for Infectious Diseases (IG-SCID) was jointly inaugurated at ICMR Hqrs., New Delhi by Prof. N. K. Ganguly, former Director General, ICMR and Prof. Jurgen Mlynek, President of the Helmholtz Association on April 3, 2007.

Subsequently, on May 18, 2007 a co-operation agreement was signed by Prof. N. K. Ganguly, ICMR and Prof. Rudi Balling of Helmholtz Centre for Infection Research (HZI), Braunschweig, Germany, in presence of the then Hon'ble Union Minister for Health & Family Welfare, Government of India, Dr. Anbumani Ramadoss in Germany. The agreement fine-tuned the modalities of co-operation and endorsed the Government of India's commitment to fight the challenges posed by infectious diseases. The cooperative efforts focus on multidisciplinary research for finding solutions to the complex problems of infectious diseases. Accordingly, under the MoU, a Joint Steering Committee (JSC) and Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) were established for coordination and development of activities of IG-SCID and for the independent selection of projects and their evaluation. The first meeting of the JSC and the Projects' Progress Seminar (PPS) were held on April 7, 2010 at ICMR Hqrs, New Delhi and the second meeting of the JSC and PPS were held on June 29-30, 2011 at Berlin, Germany to monitor the programme, decide funding, to determine future plans, priorities and review of the progress of projects. The Director General, ICMR from the Indian side and President, HGF from German side are the Co-Chairmen of Joint Steering Committee.

The goal of IG-SCID is to provide a platform to develop collaborative research work for finding solutions to the grand challenges posed by infectious diseases worldwide. To address these issues, four areas have been identified: 1. Genetic Susceptibility 2. Viral diseases (HIV/HCV) 3. Vaccines and Anti-infectives 4. Zoonoses and Animal Models of infectious diseases wherein initially, the

focus is on development of new anti-infectives, new diagnostics, and development of novel vaccine strategies along with developing basic understanding in these areas.

The virtual Indo-German Science Centre for Infectious Diseases has been established in India and to manage its activities the International Health Division, took up an ad-hoc project entitled “Managing the Indo-German Science Centre for Infectious Diseases” under the Principal Investigatorship of Dr. Mukesh Kumar, Head, IHD and Dr. Harpreet Sandhu, Scientist D, IHD as a Co- Investigator. The objective of the Centre is to play a pro-active role to facilitate and promote Indo-German bilateral collaboration in basic and translational science of infectious diseases. Several activities have been undertaken by this Centre.

Three workshops were held in the areas of Genetic Susceptibility, Vaccines and Anti-infectives, Viral Diseases (HIV/HCV) during September/October 2007 in Germany and a workshop on Zoonoses and Animal Models of Infectious Diseases was organized at New Delhi, India on September 15, 2008 with participation of approximately twenty Indian and eight German scientists. Further, in pursuance of the recommendations of the second JSC meeting, a symposium on “Translational Research in Infectious Diseases” was also organized at India International Center, New Delhi during November 28-29, 2011. The areas covered during the symposium were Hepatitis C Virus, Novel Anti-infective Compounds; Humanized Mouse Models; Improved Human Vaccines, Streptococcal Diseases and HCV/HIV Co-infection.

As a result of three workshops were held in Germany and four joint projects were conceptualized which were approved by Health Ministry’s Screening Committee (HMSC) and funded by the Division of Epidemiology and Communicable Diseases of ICMR (Total Budget from ICMR for these four projects is Rs. 4.6 Crores approx.).

To disseminate information about the Centre, the website of IG-SCID (URL <http://www.icmr.nic.in/igscid>) was inaugurated on November 26, 2009 by Dr. V. M. Katoch, the Secretary, Department of Health Research (DHR), MOHF&W, GoI & Director General, ICMR at New Delhi. The linking of the Science Circle Forum, coordinated by the German Embassy, New Delhi URL <http://www.science-circle.org/> with the IG-SCID website has been done so that the scientific communities in India and Germany can be benefited. The web-pages of the IG-SCID website are modified and updated on regular intervals.

Building upon the continuous efforts of fruitful collaborative strength, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and Helmholtz Association (HGF), Germany have re-committed to deepen their research collaboration and cooperation, in fostering translational efforts in biomedical research for a period of next five years. Accordingly, a new Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed by Dr. V. M. Katoch, Secretary, DHR, MOH&FW, GoI & Director General, ICMR from Indian side and Prof. Dirk Heinz, Scientific Director, Helmholtz Centre for Infection Research (HZI) from German side at Hyderabad House in New Delhi on May 31, 2011 in the presence of Dr. Manmohan Singh, Hon’ble Prime Minister of India and H. E. Dr. Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany.

To provide opportunities to Indian and German researchers to undertake research in thematic areas of infectious diseases, a Fellowship programme under IG-SCID was recently started in the year

2011 which would provide a platform for exchange of information/learning and training in cutting edge technologies in newer areas of science to the Indian & German researchers/young scientists.

Through the IG-SCID under ICMR-HGF MoU the researcher in India & Germany benefited in multiple areas pertaining to joint collaborative research and long term capacity building of researchers and scientists and latest technologies being used. The collaborative work under the projects has brought together the experts in India and Germany and provided preliminary leads for more scientific work in the field of HIV immunology and the development of effective therapeutic strategies against Cholera and Leishmaniasis.

Thus IG-SCID can be described as “a role model for international cooperation” and may be replicated in building healthy partnership and more collaborative projects to gain the expertise in the field of infectious diseases.