

African Society of Human Genetics
Record of Members General Meeting
La Palm Royal Beach Hotel, Accra, Ghana
9th December 2003

Theme: How to sustain the Society

- 1) Documentation of the First Annual Meeting of the African Society of Human Genetics
- 2) Future Meetings
- 3) Committees
- 4) Membership
- 5) Funding
- 6) Collaboration
- 7) Miscellaneous
 - Integration with other Genetics Organisations within Africa
 - Expansion of Countries represented
 - Other functions for the Society e.g. dissemination of information via databases
 - Office
 - Bye-laws

Introduction and General Points

Following the scientific proceedings at the Inaugural Meeting of the African Society of Human Genetics (AfSHG), a general meeting was held to discuss the future direction of the Society. It was widely agreed that the meeting was a great success and many people throughout the meeting thanked Charles Rotimi, Kwabena Poku, Sloan Sandford and many others involved with organising the meeting for doing it so well. The AfSHG must be taken seriously at the highest level from the very beginning with equivalent status to other societies such as the

American SHG. It should also be inclusive of all African countries and aim to integrate with existing Genetics Organisations in Africa.

Future activities will be defined by what we want the organisation to be known for or to represent – e.g. research and education. A ‘capability statement’ should be formulated. The Society should take a leadership role and become known for bringing together the many individuals and institutions with a broad interest in ‘Genetics in African populations’, coming from many different disciplines.

1) Documentation of the First Annual Meeting of the African Society of Human Genetics

Now the Society is established it must be sustained. Funding is crucial (see below) and the existence and aims of the Society must be publicised. One way to achieve this is to publish the proceedings from this meeting. A committee was formed to this end, comprising all individuals who presented at this meeting. Giorgio Sirugo was nominated as coordinator for this committee.

Two main reports are required:

- 1) An ‘executive summary’ comprising a concise report introducing the Society, and briefly covering the content of the meeting. This document should be published in a high impact journal such as the Lancet or Nature Genetics effectively announcing the birth of AfSHG.

- 2) A comprehensive report of the proceedings for which each speaker will provide a manuscript of their talk and these manuscripts would be published together in a special meeting report edition of a relevant journal such as Ethnicity and Disease.

Some time was spent discussing which journal should be targeted for the executive summary. The journal should be high profile and widely read. On these grounds, the Lancet was thought to be appropriate as it is freely available to resource poor countries, unlike Nature Genetics. There is no reason not to target more than one – e.g. send a ‘press release’ type summary to be included in the news and views sections of Nature, Nature Genetics etc. The executive summary should be produced within one month and it was agreed that GS would coordinate this and that each speaker would provide a short summary of their talk for him to collate. P Marshall and M Newport offered assistance with this task. MN will forward a similar report produced for

the 'Immunisation of newborns in the tropics' meeting held in The Gambia in 1999, which was published in *Vaccine* and might be a useful template.

The meeting and its proceedings will also be posted on the AfSHG website. All speakers were asked to provide an electronic version of their presentation for the website. Speakers should also provide annotations to go with the slides to make them intelligible in this context. Photographs from the meeting and a list of attendees will also be posted.

2) Future Meetings

2.1) Frequency

A follow up meeting in one year's time is essential to consolidate on the success of this first meeting. Thereafter meetings could be biennial initially and become annual as the AfSHG grows, but the main focus of today's discussion was next year's meeting.

2.2) Location for the 2nd AfSHG Meeting

General considerations raised include accessibility, transportation, cost, political stability and regional rotation such that all parts of Africa are included. Three possible venues were suggested: Addis Ababa, The Gambia and South Africa.

a) Muntaser Ibrahim put forward the case for Addis Ababa. This would allow merging with the East African SHG. Other members of the EAHGS are apparently keen to integrate, but further discussions with the appropriate individuals and organisations in Ethiopia are required. MI will take this on and report back. He pointed out that an Ethiopian venue excluded Eritrea from participating. Ethiopia boasts a cheap, good airline that flies widely across Africa.

b) The Gambia – in conjunction with the MRC/Gambia Government. Ideally should not really be another West African location for the second meeting if this is to be truly an African society.

c) South Africa – Cape Town in conjunction with UWC/SANBI and involvement of the Southern African Human Genetics Society.

2.3) Date of 2nd Annual Meeting

General considerations for the date of the 2nd AfSHG Annual Meeting included the venue's climate (e.g. not a good idea to hold it during the rainy season for whichever town selected),

occurrence of elections, teaching commitments, the willingness of a given government to underwrite some of the costs, and the fact that flight costs escalate by December. However, it was agreed that it was very important to have the next meeting one year from now - the first half of next year is too close to this one in organisational terms (getting the proceedings from this meeting published, getting sponsorship etc) but waiting longer than 12 months risks losing momentum. It was decided to aim for late November early December 2004. (It would be good to keep it inside 2004 if we want to call it an Annual meeting, but perhaps we should just call them the 1st/2nd/3rd etc AfSHG Meeting if it is going to be biennial in future).

2.4) Funding and Sponsorship for the 2nd AfSHG Meeting

Since the AfSHG is trying to create a paradigm shift in peoples' thinking, people within the continent should take ownership. It was thus suggested that an African Government underwrites the costs of the meeting next year. This would be a real challenge to achieve, but worth taking seriously. It should be possible to identify individuals within governments with power or authority who could take this on. For example GS mentioned that the Secretary of State for Health in The Gambia is a pathologist with a real interest in, and support for, the National Gambian Biobank. Also the opening Guest of Honour speaker at this meeting made a commitment to the society and was keen to be a member. An estimate of how much money is required to fund the meeting would be helpful when approaching governments. Might even get some competition going!

The other source of funding discussed was biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies. Clearly, money raised to support the next meeting (and for the AfSHG more generally) should not come with any strings attached. It was suggested the companies could be graded according to whether they were preferred donors, possible donors or unacceptable. Support could also come in non-monetary forms. It should be possible to find out which companies are active in Africa, with services of interest or use to the Society that are ethical. Those with research and educational agendas themselves would be appropriate.

Membership subscriptions will raise some funds for the Society, especially if Corporate or Institutional Membership categories were available. All members of the Society were encouraged to think how they can contribute to fund raising by taking advantage of their own connections.

Relevant journals should be invited as they might contribute financially, but also would get good publicity.

2.5) Programme agenda/theme

Pragmatically, the meeting theme has major implications for funding. For example the study of disease is more likely to attract funding than the study of genetic variation per se, so they should be combined. The theme should be broad but meaningful. A number of titles were suggested.

‘Genetic variation and its implications for disease and human origins’

‘Genetic variation and its implications for disease in Africa’

‘Genome variation and its implications for human health and disease’

Some felt it was important to have Africa in the title. Others felt these themes were too broad for a meeting programme and better represented the overall aim of the Society, and perhaps could be used as the basis for a mission statement. The meeting itself should be more focussed. An alternative suggestion was to simply call the meeting ‘The 2nd Annual Meeting of the AfSHG’, and a programme can be developed nearer the time. There would be plenary sessions and themed sessions within the meeting, and as already discussed, the subjects for specialist sessions may well need to reflect where the funding is coming from, or rather chosen to enhance ability to get funds. Exchange of technology and training should be on the agenda.

3) Committees

The following committees were set up:

a) Executive Committee

Chair: Charles Rotimi

Secretary: Melanie Newport

Treasurer: Felix Okojie

Communications and IT: Adebawale Adeyemo

plus 5 regional representatives to be appointed: North, South, Central, East and West

b) Taskforce Committee with responsibility for Documentation of 2003 Meeting

G Sirugo (coordinator)

C Adebamowo

G Dunston

P Marshall

O Omotade
R Isokpehi
M Newport
C Rotimi
S Williams
M Ibrahim

Adebowale Adeyemo is the webmaster.

c) Organising Committee for 2nd Annual AfSHG Meeting

Muntaser Ibrahim
Scott Williams
Kwabena Poku
Charmaine Royal
Giorgio Sirugo
Representative (s) from the host country.

Subcommittees will be developed by this committee to achieve more specific tasks, such as programme development.

4) Membership

Membership will build capacity for the AfSHG, and is also a means for fund raising. Individual and Institutional membership will be available. Within the individual category, student membership will be free (a strict definition of student will be required and included in the byelaws, but will basically cover undergraduates and graduate students). Regarding membership costs for non-students, a motion was passed that individuals within Africa will pay \$25, whilst those based permanently outside Africa will pay \$125. Institutional membership and other categories (e.g. life-long membership and honorary membership) will be defined in more detail by the Executive Committee.

5) Funding

Funding is obviously crucial for the survival of the society. Many of the funding issues raised above regarding the next meeting apply generally to the Society. In addition to the Annual Meeting, funds will be required for specific projects, to sponsor members to attend other

meetings etc. All members of the society must accept responsibility to help raise funds, by thinking about their own connections and also by supporting the executive committee when requested. The AfSHG has broad-ranging interests that should be highlighted. Individual membership fees were decided, but more thought needs to go into Institutional, and Honorary membership as a means to raise funds for the society. A subcommittee for fundraising was recommended, to be chaired by the executive treasurer. There are a number of organisations to approach – e.g. FASEB, DFID, USAID, NEPAD Fogarty International Center and private foundations.

6) Collaboration

Unfortunately, time did not permit a deeper discussion on the importance of collaboration to the survival of the AfSHG. The Society will encourage collaborative research and again this has important implications for funding. A list of all members' contact details and interests will be posted on the website. There will also be links to other websites of interest. For example there are already websites constructed for those interested in genetics and African populations (c/o Scott Williams)

7) Miscellaneous Items

7.1) Integration with other African Genetic Societies

Other African Genetics Organisations include

- a) East African Genetics Society which meets every 1-2 years with the next meeting planned for Addis Ababa
- b) African Genome Initiative next meets in Cairo March 2004
- c) Southern African Society for Human Genetics
- d) African Bioinformatics Network

These organisations should be contacted and links developed.

The AfSHG should become affiliated with the International Federation of Human Genetics Societies (<http://www.ifhgs.org/>).

7.2) Inclusion of all African Countries

It was accepted that there was a lack of representation of French and Portuguese speaking countries at this meeting. The AfSHG is an inclusive society; the Society must be open and

transparent. To address this, some felt it would be important to translate all proceedings into French and Portuguese, and to involve individuals from these countries in the Society, e.g. on Committees. However, it becomes very complicated to implement translations, especially into two different languages. Since English is the common language of the scientific community, the AfSHG should use English, but make an effort to involve French and Portuguese speakers by talking to them at this early stage in the development of the Society. (Perhaps people who are aware of such researchers should be getting in touch now to publicise the Society.) There are many points of entry into involvement of francophone countries – for example there are biobanks in Senegal, and French funded collaborations in Senegal and Burkina Faso. It was suggested that the Francophone/Anglophone dilemma was a West African problem and should be solved regionally!

7.2) Other functions for the Society e.g. dissemination of information via databases

If the AfSHG can offer practical benefits for members it will make it more attractive and more sustainable. For example, a database could be set up where people could deposit allele frequency information that could be accessed by all members.

7.3) Office

The office will be a virtual office with the focal point being the website: www.afshg.org .

7.4) Byelaws

The society will need a set of byelaws in order to implement and regulated many of the subjects discussed so far (e.g. membership, fundraising, committees). It should be possible to adapt byelaws from similar institutions to suit the AfSHG needs.