

Information Note¹

- Event:** Conference on *Dual Use Research of Concern* (Life Sciences)
- Organizers:** World Health Organization (WHO) in cooperation with the US Institute of Medicine and supported by the governments of the United States and the Netherlands
- Venue and Date:** Centre Internationale de Conférences de Genève, Geneva, Switzerland 26 to 28 February 2013
- Participants:** Individuals from the following countries: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Canada, China, Finland, France, Germany, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Luxemburg, Mexico, Netherlands, Nigeria, Philippines, Poland, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, Thailand, Tunisia, United Kingdom, United States, Uganda, Vietnam.
Organisations; Officials in their personal capacity from the WHO, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Animal Health Organization (OIE), the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC), the European Commission (EC) and the 1540 group of experts.

1. Conference Objective

The objective of the conference was to identify key issues related to dual use research of concern (DURC) in the field of the life sciences, review existing approaches to addressing the concerns, assess gaps in managing DURC and discuss options to address those gaps.

2. Background

Scientific and technological developments in the life sciences and dual use issues have important implications for global health security. Current developments in the life sciences and their increasing integration with the natural sciences will bring benefits to health security through, for example, enhanced vaccines, therapeutics and disease surveillance. However, factors such as the pace of these developments, the ease of dissemination with communications technologies and the diffusion of life science research across multiple scientific disciplines also increase the potential for risks to

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global health security through possible misuse for terrorism purposes and to biological safety.

Concerns about dual use life sciences research, i.e. where the results have the potential to benefit as well as harm human health, have generated much debate. Within the life sciences community, the topic is not new, as exemplified by the establishment of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC). In recent years however events such as the 2001 anthrax letters in the United States, accidental release of pathogens from laboratories and publication of certain research findings have stimulated fresh scrutiny of the adequacy of life sciences research governance. The BTWC was later reinforced by UN Security Council Resolution 1540 (2004) with a particular focus on requiring States to prevent non-State actors acquiring the capability to use materials and technology for the development of weapons of mass destruction.

3. Highlights

The meeting was very successful in bringing together 111 leading scientists from the academic, governmental and private sectors, as well senior policy officials. They came from 36 countries from all regions of the world. The relevant international organisations were also well represented. The participants were invited in their personal capacities rather than as organizational representatives in order to encourage as free as possible discussion.

The first day and a half of the conference was taken up with a series of eight panels that were designed to generate as much discussion as possible. The panelists' remarks were limited to five minutes each and covered the following topics: public health, security, ethics, risk assessment, the role of funding agencies and foundations, policy development and professional associations, the latest developments in science and technology and, final, scientific journals. In the talks and discussions there was a general recognition that the benefits of the developments in the life sciences would be best served by the maximum degree of openness in the publication of research results. It was generally felt that cases requiring some restriction would be exceptional. However, there were differing views on how the governance requirements would be best met.

The issues were further developed in eight breakout groups covering: security, public health research, outreach and education, publishing and communications, biotechnology and the private sector, international cooperation, ethics and societal impact. The feed back from the breakout groups will provide the substance for the report that will be published by the WHO and recommend the next steps.

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