

02/03/2014

Dear Colleagues,

Happy New Year to all! I am envious of the warm sun in sub-Saharan Africa; here in Chicago we have been suffering a cold, snowy winter.

With the start of 2014, we would like to initiate a bi-monthly newsletter to highlight progress, provide updates, and share news of interest among HepNet members. This can also serve as a mechanism to post questions to the group, and highlight meetings or articles that may be of relevant to the group. Moving forward, we will send an email out a couple weeks before the newsletter release, seeking contributions from members.

In this initial newsletter I would like to highlight HepNet progress that has been made in 2013:

- 1.) **HepNet is formed!** Through the efforts of so many, including all HepNet members!, we have been able to create this network focused on the study of viral hepatitis in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is a pleasure to collaborate with so many excellent, dedicated clinicians and scientists!
- 2.) **Inaugural Meeting in Kumasi, Ghana:** In August we held our inaugural meeting in Kumasi Ghana. This would not have run so smoothly without the help of so many. Richard Phillips and Dorcas Owusu made the excellent arrangements at the hotel and for our visit to Obuasi. Albert was an important on the ground facilitator for so many details! From Loyola, Nallely Mora and Lara Dugas meticulously charged the meeting's organizational efforts. I can't thank enough all the advise received from experts and more seasoned investigators such as Amy Luke, JP Allain and Kenrad Nelson!

And thanks to **all** participants for the numerous well prepared presentations, and open discussions on HBV, HCV, and liver cancer. Amy Luke and Jacob Plange-Rhule kicked off the meeting with an excellent presentation on multi site collaborative research that set the tone for the subsequent lectures. Please check out the websites link highlighting the meeting's agenda and talks: <http://stritch.luc.edu/hepnet/content/news-events>

- 3.) **HepNet website:** We have a website! Now the trick is to figure out how best to use it to increase our growth, improve communication, and foster collaborations. We have received several email inquires from outside investigators, and attracted new HepNet members: (see below). Any input appreciated on the website: <http://stritch.luc.edu/hepnet>
- 4.) **Studies / Papers;**
 - a. **HCV Perspective Paper:** This joint effort paper highlights unresolved issues surrounding HCV in SSA. Still looking for its' final home!

- b. **HCV Blood Bank Protocol:** This study has been running for over 6 months now, completing the first stage of enrollment. Dr. Richard Phillip's and Dr Shirley Owusu-Ofori's have directed a highly efficient study team. We have now analyzed all data from the first stage of enrollment, providing important data on appropriate serologic testing and confirmation, viral phylogeny data, and risk factor assessments. This has been a multi-institute collaborative project, with investigators from Loyola, KNUST, CDC, and University of Cambridge. We will send papers to the whole group once published!

Enrollment continues on this study.

- c. **Obuasi Population Study:** We are excited to report that all necessary ethical approvals have been secured for this exciting project! The objectives are to define the population level epidemiology of HCV, further assess risk factors for transmission, and examine the viral and host genetics of HCV outcomes. The idea for this study was developed after Dr Opare-Sem was able to secure donated HCV rapid screening kits from Roche.

Dr Richard Phillips, Dr Stephen Sarfo, and Dorcas have been working with Obusai officials to establish the best mechanism to begin recruitment and build a study team. We now have a targeted start date of 3/1/2014.

- d. **HBV Viral Sequencing study:** Using stored samples from both Nigeria and Ghana, the CDC is working on whole genome sequencing of HBV viral isolates.
- e. **HBV Vertical Transmission Survey:** Dr Kenrad Nelson and Dr Stephen Ehrhardt, MD have expertise in studying HBV vertical transmission and proposed the idea of interviewing HBV+pregnant women and their clinicians on the feasibility, acceptability, and knowledge of HBV vertical transmission prevention. With the help of Dr Roderick Larsen-Reindorf, a Loyola Medical Student, Anita Cheng, administered a survey to practicing physicians at KNUST this past summer. This study is being revisited, with the hopes that both pregnant women and physicians can be interviewed this coming spring to better understand the issues surrounding HBV in pregnant women.

5.) Grants:

- a. **HCV in Sub-Saharan Africa: A HepNet study. NIH R01** (co-PIs: J Layden, R Cooper, K Nelson). This was submitted at the end of 2013, and will be scientifically reviewed by the NIH later this month. The

intent is to conduct population and hospital based studies in Ghana (R Phillips, co-inv.), Nigeria (B Salako, A Akere, co-inv), and Uganda. The CDC (J Forbi, Y Khudyakov) will conduct the viral sequencing, and Duke (T Urban) the host genetics.

- b. **Molecular epidemiology of HBV.** (co-PIs: J Layden and R Phillips). We are busily working on a NIH U grant proposal to build off the infrastructure we have in Obuasi, and examine the critical molecular and virology aspects of HBV.
- c. **Loyola Internal Research Funding Committee Grant, 2013.** This is now complete, and provided the necessary resources for our initial serologic and virologic testing.
- d. **If there are other grants to be highlighted, please let us know!**

- 6.) **New Members:** Please welcome the following individual to our network: Bankole Henry Oladeine, M.Sc. Please see his short bio on our website!

It is quite amazing to sit back and see the progress we made in the last year. What awaits 2014? Hopefully some published papers, a grant or two, and new studies. Perhaps another group meeting?!

If you have articles, grants, news, or other items relevant to HepNet, please send them to Nallely, Mora, MD, MPH.

Warm wishes to all!

Jen Layden