



A Molecular Biology Network for Asia and the Pacific Rim

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Scientists from leading institutions throughout Asia and the Pacific Rim have come together to establish the International Molecular Biology Network (IMBN). This new organization will serve as a catalyst for molecular biology and biotechnology in the region by (i) promoting training and skills development, (ii) encouraging personnel and scientific exchange, (iii) recognizing excellence, and (iv) providing a forum to assess needs and priorities. IMBN will be open to all scientists from public and private sectors, with particular focus on Asia and the Pacific Rim; it will bring together scientists, institutions, governments, and industry to develop and strengthen a world-class molecular biology and biotechnology base.

The vision guiding the establishment of IMBN is captured in the preamble to the draft constitution: "The International Molecular Biology Network for Asia and the Pacific Rim is founded in the belief that molecular biology, cell biology and biotechnology can contribute greatly to the benefit of humankind, and that such benefit will accrue through close cooperation and collaboration amongst scientists and scientific institutions, supported by national and international agencies, and industry. The Network will provide a forum and mechanism for such interaction through a range of activities including promoting collaborative research, the provision of training and skill enhancement opportunities, and the dissemination of information."

Modeled loosely after the European Molecular Biology Organization, IMBN will accommodate the wide range of scientific and technical capability that exists in Asian and Pacific Rim economies and the very different historical and cultural experiences of these societies. Until very recently, economies in the region tended to have much stronger links with Europe, the United States, and Canada than they did with each other. With the growth of socio-economic interdependence as a consequence of ex-

panding trade links has come the realization that there is much to be gained from closer cooperation. Similarities and synergies are much more marked than differences, especially as many of the economies are simultaneously undergoing the transition from traditional, largely agricultural societies to modern urbanized ones.

Substantial momentum has been built up during the early stages of development of IMBN. Starting with a meeting to found the initiative, held in Tokyo in June 1997, the idea quickly obtained the status of regional priority among the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) economies. Leading institutions in Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Singapore, and Chinese Taipei have since come together to provide seed funding to kick-start the initiative. Several governments have indicated a willingness to provide financial support for specific projects, and there has also been great interest from industry. To oversee the early development of IMBN, an Establishment Taskforce was formed. It first met in Shanghai in November 1997 and elected Ken-ichi Arai, director of Tokyo University's Institute of Medical Sciences, as chairman; Jeongbin Yim of the Institute of Molecular Biology and Genetics at Seoul National University and Louis Lim of the Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology in Singapore as vice chairmen; and Nancy Ip of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology as treasurer. The task force also appointed Gurinder Shahi as the executive director and coordinator of the IMBN Secretariat.

The following priorities were set by the Establishment Taskforce: (i) the continuing development, at national and international levels, of the identity and credibility of IMBN; (ii) the establishment of Membership, Resource Mobilization, and Programs Taskforces; (iii) the ongoing development of the Web site (www.imbn.org); (iv) the setting up of an expert commission (see below); and (v) the organization of the first IMBN conference (see below). Additionally, planning is under way for a central IMBN laboratory (along the lines of the European Molecular Biology Laboratory) and for the establishment of several unit-sized

IMBN laboratories in centers of excellence throughout the region.

IMBN will strive to recognize excellence in science—only the best and brightest can aspire to become full members, from among whom a governing council will be elected. The Establishment Taskforce initiated a process to identify a pool of 200 leading scientists throughout the region, from among whom founding members will be selected. Subsequently, IMBN members will be selected by an open application process. At the same time, IMBN seeks to be inclusive, by providing training and skill enhancement opportunities, by making its information resources widely available, and through the establishment of a collaborative research grant program.

For the fiscal year 1998, a budget of approximately U.S. \$417,000 has been set, of which over U.S. \$300,000 has already been pledged by institutions, government, and industry. This budget will cover the operation of the secretariat, the launch of several initiatives (including the IMBN commission), the provision of a small number of traveling fellowships and studentships, the support of some courses and practical workshops, and the initiation of a collaborative research grants program.

In March of this year, IMBN representatives met in Taipei with the 14th APEC Industrial Science and Technology Working Group to consider how APEC economies can best support IMBN and vice versa. As a result, an IMBN commission was formed to develop a long-term strategic vision. This commission will publish its findings and recommendations by the spring of 1999.

The first IMBN conference will be held in Seoul this month (June 1998) on the theme "Priority Concerns and Needs in Molecular Biology and Biotechnology Development in Asia and the Pacific Rim." It will be open to all interested scientists and policy-makers. The first-ever meeting of IMBN's elected governing council will be held in Pohang, Korea, during the same month.

To maintain and build on this pace of development, IMBN will need to engender a common sense of ownership among scientists throughout Asia and the Pacific Rim and to translate the interest and support expressed into substantive financial commitment. It must harness the energies of scientists, institutions, governments, and industry to develop world-class molecular biology and biotechnology. Potentially, IMBN can achieve a great deal, but whether or not it fulfills its promise depends on the enthusiasm and active support of all who recognize this potential. To paraphrase a great U.S. president, "Ask not what IMBN can do for you, but what you can do for IMBN!"



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