Translating New Technologies to Improve Public Health in Africa

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Meeting summary

The question of how to employ new technologies that have evolved out of the various genome/proteome projects and apply them to the neglected diseases within a clinical or research setting in Africa, or any other part of the developing world, will be the focus of this meeting. The organizers of this meeting have brought together a group of internationally recognized investigators who will provide practical insights for taking cutting edge concepts in the biosciences and applying them towards a better understanding of these diseases and/or the design of better strategies for controlling them. This meeting will also address operational issues such as the better integration of the various disease-specific control strategies and the need for capacity building especially as it relates to the issues surrounding clinical trials.

Session

Challenges of Enhancing Biomedical Infrastructure in Africa
May 19, 2:30-4:30 PM

Presenter

Julia Royall, National Library of Medicine

Title

The change challenge of information-technology infrastructure – are there positive outcomes or is everything just louder and faster?

Abstract

In stark contrast to 1990 when all of sub-Saharan Africa had but one dial-up Internet connection out of South Africa, telecommunication is now all the rage. Cell phones, Internet cafes, and individual connections are popping up everywhere in African urban areas with penetration now advancing steadily into the rural regions. There should be a lot for the biomedical field to build on – and there is. But there are challenges, to say the least.

In 1997, under the auspices of the U.S. National Library of Medicine, the Multilateral Initiative on Malaria Communications Network (MIMCom) set out to provide malaria researchers in Africa with enhanced connectivity to the Internet, to information resources,

to collaborative research, and to one another. The latter was based on the belief that south-south communication could begin to address the enormous morbidity and mortality challenges presented by malaria. Connections to the Internet and to information were made, using a smorgasbord of technology options and resulting in researchers being able to connect to funding agencies, journal articles, and the international scientific community.

MIMCom was only a beginning. Fast forward 11 years to 2008 with a stop for evaluation in 2003. What difference have these resources made in biomedical research? For research networks? For individual researchers? Has south-south communication and collaboration improved? One problem is undoubtedly technical: a look to the future tells us that the East African Submarine Cable System (EASSY) now under construction on the East coast of Africa will connect with the dark fiber being laid by MTN and UTL in Uganda, Kenya, and Rwanda. How will increased technical infrastructure make a difference? How does the human nature factor inform the equation?

Ms. Royall's presentation will look at examples from individual researchers and a research network in Africa in order to offer insight into what has been accomplished thus far and the factors which will inform the future shape and meaning of biomedical research in Africa.