Asia-Pacific Alliance for the Control of Influenza (APACI)

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How and when did your organization start, and where are you located?

APACI began its life in 2002 as an advisory committee on influenza control, with representatives from most countries within the Asia-Pacific region. It was a virtual organization in the sense that it did not have a home country. The committee members met from time to time, often in conjunction with an international conference on influenza.

In 2011, the committee was formalised, and was registered in Hong Kong as a company limited by guarantee – a not-for-profit entity with charitable status. It’s operational office is in Melbourne Australia.

What are the most critical problems in vaccine/immunotherapeutics development in your field of interest?

Perhaps the greatest challenge relates to the changing nature of the influenza virus, and the subsequent need for continually updating the vaccine formula. Current influenza vaccines target surface proteins on the influenza virus. The vaccines help the body’s immune system to produce antibodies to these proteins so we recognise the virus when it enters the body and fight it. However these proteins are changed slightly by the virus over time and so we need to change the vaccines to reflect the new protein targets on the surface of the virus. Twice each year, the WHO determines through its surveillance network, the most likely variation of the virus to be circulating, and makes a recommendation for the virus candidates that should be used in the vaccine formula, for the southern hemisphere in October, and the northern hemisphere in February of each year.

A second significant challenge is to raise awareness of the potential seriousness of influenza, so that more people are vaccinated.

What is the mission of your organization?

To reduce the burden of influenza in the Asia-Pacific region. This is done with the following objectives in mind:

- Identify and develop activities that complement the World Health Organization (WHO) Global Agenda on Influenza Surveillance and Control.
- Assist the development of country-specific public awareness programmes on influenza.
- Promote influenza awareness among healthcare professionals in the region.
- Provide educational resources to support influenza awareness activities.
- Assist the process of establishing or reviewing country-specific recommendations for influenza prevention and control.
- Facilitate the timely access to, and supply of, influenza vaccines and antiviral medications.

How does your organization facilitate vaccine/immunotherapeutics development?

APACI is an advocacy group, providing information and education in relation to the prevention and treatment of influenza. It is not directly involved in the development of vaccines, other than by creating a forum where ideas about vaccine development may be addressed.

How does your organization engage national and international resources committed to vaccine/immunotherapy research?

APACI organises annual meetings and workshops throughout the Asia-Pacific region, and produces a number of on-line publications that are distributed through its subscriber database (all of APACI’s activities are provided at no cost to the user). Therefore we seek support primarily from industry to underwrite the cost of our activities.

What important partnerships does your organization have?

APACI works with a number of like minded organizations throughout the Asia-Pacific, Europe and the USA. We also collaborate with a variety of institutions to provide the highest quality and most effective meetings and workshops. We have also established Influenza Foundations in India, Indonesia and Thailand, with new foundations soon to emerge from Vietnam, Malaysia and China.

What is your position in the organization?

I am the Executive Director of APACI
What “highlights” would you select in recent vaccine/immunotherapy research, development, or use?

The development of the quadrivalent flu vaccine, and the live attenuated nasal flu vaccine for children are both important milestones. The introduction of high dose and adjuvanted influenza vaccines will make a significant difference in protection for older people. There have also been some encouraging developments in the area of the “universal influenza vaccine” (a vaccine that will be independent of the yearly mutations in the virus), although there is still a long way to go. In addition, there have been some encouraging signs in the development of new drugs for the treatment of influenza.

What areas or topics does your organization currently focus on?

At the moment we are particularly interested in seeing seasonal influenza programs introduced in those countries that presently do not have them. A functional seasonal influenza program will not only protect the lives of individuals throughout the influenza season, but also enables the infrastructure to be in place for when the next pandemic arrives.

What are your main goals for the next 5 years?

- Improve the methods of education for healthcare professionals.
- The creation of influenza foundations (or equivalent) in all Asia-Pacific countries, to ensure governments, healthcare workers, and the community have the latest information about the prevention and treatment of influenza.
- Increase the membership of APACI so that it best represents the community within which it operates.