

Appendix 7.3

Final Report of Networks – Phytopharmaceuticals

HEFCE Collaboration Research Network with Brazil

Phytopharmaceuticals Scheme

Report of Network Consultation February 12th 2003

Members present

Professor Peter Houghton
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Written comments received from

Dr Neil Robinson
Molecular Nature Ltd
Dr C W Wright
School of Pharmacy, University of Bradford
Professor Peter Hylands (apologies for absence only)
Oxford Natural Products PLC
Dr A I Gray (apologies for absence only)
Strathclyde Institute for Biomedical Sciences (SIBS), University of Strathclyde

No reply

Dr Robert J Nash
Molecular Nature Ltd
Dr Philip Gunning
Phytopharm PLC

Views and reflection on the last three years

Success of the network

The network had achieved limited success, both in its activities within the UK and with its links with Brazil.

Within the UK, the following features are positive aspects:-

- Setting up of website
- Increased networking between members and strengthening existing links. These links are likely to be carried on and consolidate within other frameworks, e.g. Pharmacognosy Focus Group of Academy of Pharmaceutical Sciences of Great Britain.

With Brazil, the following are positive aspects:-

- Links established between UK members and various individuals and groups within Rio
- Collaboration between Dr Wright and Dr Felzenszalb (see attached report from Dr Wright)
- Visit of Ms Fabiola du Rocha from NPPN, UFRJ Rio de Janeiro, to Prof Houghton's lab September 2002 – March 2003
- Interaction with Prof Antonio Jorge Ribeiro da Silva when he visited London in October 2001
- Enquiries received by several UK members from several contacts of Brazil members following visits made by UK delegation to Brazil November 2000 and visit of Prof da Silva.

The following negative aspects were noted

Within the UK:-

- No separate meeting of the Network had been held. This is partly due to pressures of other commitments, but also because other meetings are held in the same topic area by organisations such as Academy of Pharmaceutical Sciences, where the members meet each other informally and discuss relevant topical issues.

With Brazil:-

- The lifespan of the original Network expired in less than 12 months of the Collaborative Scheme being set up. When the UK group visited Brazil in November 2000, it was plain that there were academic groups who should have been included who knew little of the Rio network under new leadership (Prof da Silva) and encompassing more groups, although there were few industrial partners. However, in spite of efforts made by the new coordinator, there appeared to be little enthusiasm for the proposed sending of Brazilian students for short (i.e. up to 6 months) visits to the UK. This was exacerbated by the economic problems in Brazil.

One PhD student, Ms Fabiola du Rocha, from Prof da Silva's Research group, is currently spending 6 months at King's College London.

- The restriction on research being undertaken on Brazilian plant material and extracts because of interpretation of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) were not fully appreciated by those who suggested the scheme. In effect, the CBD prevents research carried out on such material outside Brazil, even by Brazilians, so Brazilian PhD students would not be able to work on their projects even if they were inclined to come to the UK.
- In contrast to the situation in the UK, there appears still to be considerable mistrust, and therefore lack of collaboration between many academia and industrial organisations in Rio.

Other Comments

1. From the beginning of the scheme, the definition of 'phytopharmaceuticals' was unclear which made it difficult to determine likely industrial partners within the UK. The industrial partners who have shown interest could be categorised as interested in the development of new pharmaceuticals and medicines based on constituents or extracts of plants. After some contact with the Brazilian network, particularly as a result of the visit in November 2000, it became clear that the industrial partner in Rio was concerned more with the production of extracts of established herbs rather than development of medical products. With hindsight, and with the changed situation in the UK in recent years, the UK network could have sought links with companies whose work is more similar to that of the Brazilian partnership. Valuable discussions in the areas of quality control techniques and technology transfer would therefore now have been possible.

2. Many of the members of the UK network have links with academics and other groups in the area of phytopharmaceuticals in Brazil, but in states other than Rio. More progress would probably have been made if the network had not been restricted to the state of Rio alone.

Other aspects

Funds from other sources

All aspects of the activities of the network have been covered by HEFCE funds apart from the visit of Ms du Rocha to London which is partly supported CAPES.

Industry input

The knowledge possessed by Dr Neil Robinson was invaluable during the visit to Rio in November 2000 in making contact with various groups and individuals.

Sustainability and future plans

Although positive results have been obtained as a result of the network, we do not think that the network is sustainable in its present form, due to the reluctance and economic aspects of the Brazilian network and the many other pressures on UK members. The UK members still value continuing academic exchanges with institutions in Brazil.

Lessons learnt

It was agreed that it is not easy to translate decisions made for primarily political reasons (i.e. the setting up of the scheme as part of a wider plan to increase links between the UK and Brazil) into meaningful scientific activity. Clear definitions and the viability of the proposed work, especially in the case of international agreements such as the CBD, need to be thought out before such schemes are launched.

Conclusions

In principle the scheme had laudable aims. The limit of its success was due partly to unconsidered factors e.g. the implications of CBD, partly to the local situation e.g. little collaboration between industry and academia in Rio partly to lack of definition of the subject of the scheme.

Adverse factors included the termination of the period of operation of the original Rio scheme not long after the establishment of the UK network and the problems of communication with the leader of the scheme at that time.

It is difficult to explain the apparent reluctance of the Brazilian members of the reformed network as we were received quite enthusiastically by them on our visit in November 2000. The worsening economic situation in Brazil undoubtedly had a negative effect, as did possibly fears over language deficiencies on the part of some of the potential student visitors.

The members of the UK network who have been most actively concerned with the scheme consider that it has been valuable and worthwhile exercise, but are disappointed that there are not more positive results apparent.