

**Date:** Thursday 31<sup>st</sup> May (Vesak Day)

**Time:** 8.30am

**Theme for the ISBER meeting:** “International Biobanking Standards”

Dr Marianna Bledsoe, President of ISBER

Distinguished guests, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen

I would like to welcome you warmly to Singapore and to the ISBER 2007 Annual Meeting. In particular, I would like to welcome the many distinguished speakers, participants and guests who have traveled from around the world to join us. We are delighted and very honoured to host this prestigious meeting in Singapore, the first time that the event is being held in Asia.

This meeting is of particular interest and relevance to us, as Singapore continues to push into the next phase of our Biomedical Sciences Initiative. Singapore first made a strong commitment in the year 2000, to develop the Biomedical Sciences as a new sector of our economy. Under the visionary leadership of Mr Philip Yeo, then Chairman of the Agency for Science Technology and Research, or ASTAR, much progress was made over the five year period from 2000-2005, particularly in the basic biomedical sciences research arena.

During this period, the focus was on building up 3 main areas. Firstly, developing the human capital which is absolutely critical for the success of such an effort. In this, we adopted a pro-local/ pro-foreign policy. On the one hand, we supported and developed many excellent local scientists and ASTAR established a prestigious scholarship scheme which provided opportunities for the best and brightest local students to study in some of the best universities throughout the world. At present, we have over 400 of such scholars – they represent our investment for the success of biomedical science in Singapore in the future. On the pro-foreign side, we have attracted world-class talent to work and live in Singapore.

Later this morning, we will have the pleasure of listening to one of them, namely Prof Edison Liu who will be speaking at this meeting,

Secondly, we have put substantial effort into developing our intellectual capital in biomedical sciences. In the year 2000, there was only 1 research institute in ASTAR ie the Institute for Molecular and Cell Biology. Today we have 5 institutes covering Genomics, Bioengineering and Nanotechnology, Bioprocessing Technology and Bioinformatics. In addition, highly competitive research programmes have developed in the National University of Singapore, and in our hospitals and disease centres.

Thirdly, we have built up the Industrial Capital for Biomedical Sciences. The most visible manifestation of our investments in this regard is Biopolis which I believe many of you have seen or will be visiting. However, as part of the infrastructure for doing good research, we have also developed strong ethical and regulatory frameworks, as well as key enabling resources. These key enabling resources include well annotated clinical data and tissue.

In 2006, I was asked to chair a committee to review the progress made in the first phase of the Biomedical Sciences Initiative and to make recommendations for the next phase, from 2006-2010. Our committee made 4 recommendations which have since been accepted and supported by the Singapore government. The first recommendation was to continue to invest and build on the basic biomedical science research capabilities in ASTAR and our universities. This is critical because a very strong basic science foundation is an absolute prerequisite for impactful new applications and commercialization.

The second recommendation was that Singapore should build a strong Translational and clinical research capability to maximize the opportunities for new applications and commercialization. This would require us to nurture, train and recruit a sizeable pool of talented clinician-scientists and clinician-investigators. While building a strong research capability, we would focus on developing highly competitive programmes in selected disease areas where Singapore has comparative advantages based on the presence in our population of 3 Asian ethnic groups and the higher prevalence of specific types of medical disorders. We would put a particular focus on building up capabilities to carry out proof – of-concept and Phase 1 clinical studies in selected diseases, with the objective of making Singapore the preferred site in Asia for such studies to be carried out. While further

strengthening our ethical and research framework, we will also work towards develop some of the best enabling resources in Asia for high quality translational research. This would cover clinical data and tissues. We believe that the development of necessary enabling resources and platforms that facilitate high quality translational research will increase the competitiveness of our public research programmes and attract industry to carry out research in Singapore.

The third recommendation was for this effort to be adequately resourced and the Singapore government has shown its strong commitment by allocating S\$1.55 bn to support translational and clinical research over the next 5 years.

Finally, understanding that translational and clinical research require a much higher level of coordination, we recommended the establishment of a high-level coordinating committee lead by the Chairman of ASTAR and the Permanent Secretary of Health.

With the Singapore government's strong and long term support, I am happy to report that we have been making excellent progress in implementing the specific programmes and initiatives under phase II of the Biomedical Sciences Initiative. As I had mentioned, we recognize the importance of the availability of high quality human tissue samples collected under stringent collection and processing protocols and in full compliance with accepted ethical and regulatory guidelines. This was the motivation for establishing the Singapore Tissue Network, which serves as the national repository for human tissues in the country. I hope that many of you had the opportunity to participate in the tour to the STN. As I mentioned, we are indeed honoured and delighted to host this important meeting in Singapore. We are looking forward very much to learning from the many leaders and experts in tissue banking who will be speaking and participating in the discussions at this meeting. I hope that this will form the basis for new friendships and professional contacts to be made, as well as provide a platform and catalyst for productive collaborations. With that, I would like to welcome you once again to Singapore and to wish you a most fruitful and enjoyable conference. Thank you.