

Summary of the NIAID Conference to Advance Leishmaniasis Research in North Africa and the Middle East, Tunis, Tunisia, June 22 to 25, 2009

From June 22 to 26, 2009, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), National Institutes of Health (NIH), Office of Global Research within the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (OGR/NIAID) and several international partners held a conference in Tunis, Tunisia, focusing on enhancing leishmaniasis research in the region. The conference, entitled *Leishmaniasis: Collaborative Research Opportunities in North Africa and the Middle East*, was sponsored by NIAID and the NIH Office of Rare Diseases (ORD), and included 100 participants from Afghanistan, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Iran, Mali, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Sudan, Syria, Turkey, Tunisia and the United States. In addition to NIAID, the HHS/ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and HHS/ Food and Drug Administration (FDA) also participated as conference speakers. The Institut Pasteur de Tunis, an NIAID-supported Tropical Medicine Research Center, was the in-country partner for the event.

Day one of the Conference was held at the Institut Pasteur de Tunis and included an overview of Leishmaniasis activities and tour of the laboratories, from the seven team leaders working on aspects of the disease. On Day two, the opening session included welcome addresses from Steven Smith, Director, Office of Global Research, NIAID, U.S. Ambassador to Tunisia, Robert Godec, the Tunisian Minister of Public Health, Mondher Zenaidi, as well as representatives from the World Health Organization (WHO) and Institut Pasteur de Tunis. The Conference included an opening plenary session entitled, *Advances in Our Understanding of Leishmaniasis as a Vector-Borne Disease* by David Sacks, Chief, Intracellular Parasite Biology Section, DIR, NIAID. Days two to four consisted of country-specific epidemiological reports, as well as scientific presentations on recent advances in the following areas: susceptibility and resistance to leishmaniasis in rodent models and in humans; effects of sand fly salivary proteins on disease outcome; the genome of the *Leishmania* parasite and an update on the Sand Fly Genome Project; and leishmaniasis control strategies, including novel diagnostic tests and drug and vaccine candidates as well as interventions directed toward the sand fly and animal hosts. The conference was announced in the NIAID Bulletin through a news release issued prior to the conference at the following site:

http://www3.niaid.nih.gov/news/newsreleases/2009/leishmaniasis_conference.htm

Staff from NIAID, NIH including the Fogarty International Center (FIC), the Civilian Research and Development Foundation (CDRF), the U.S. Naval Medical Research Unit No. 3 and the WHO provided individual mentoring to interested participants on how to apply for funding for their research on leishmania. In addition, conference participants are eligible to apply for a competitive, NIAID-funded CDRF grant that provides seed money for collaborative leishmaniasis research, and feedback has indicated that many will do so. The CDRF announcement, which closes September 30, 2009, and application forms are on-line at the following site:

http://www.crdp.org/funding/funding_show.htm?doc_id=949719

Plans are for summaries of the scientific findings of the conference to be published on-line on *PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases* in early 2010.