Two organisations, the Association of Clinical Biochemists (ACB) and the British In Vitro Diagnostics Association (BIVDA) are set to work together for FOCUS 2003, the ACB’s annual conference which will be held on 13th – 15th May at the MICC, Manchester.

Dr Ian Gibson   Doris-Ann Williams

The aim is to create a platform for raising the profile of diagnostics. UK investment in diagnostic testing is low - the second lowest in the EU member states.

The ACB’s president, Professor Alan Shenkin explains “Raising awareness of the value of diagnostics at a time when funding for the NHS is set to rise represents an exciting opportunity to ensure it receives greater investment.” Doris-Ann Williams, BIVDA’s director general adds “Diagnostics has for too long been perceived as a cost burden to the NHS resulting in delays in uptake of new tests and has creating a ‘missing link’ in the delivery of healthcare”.

Worldwide, one of the fastest growing applications for diagnostics is in home testing. This market is currently growing by an estimated 11 per cent worldwide and now accounts for 20 per cent of the European diagnostics market. Home glucose testing, for example, has had an enormous impact on the day-to-day self-management of diabetes. The British public is becoming more demanding of healthcare screening services. Central to the Focus conference, a debate on the value of home testing will address some of the relevant issues. Dr Ian Gibson MP, one of the participants explains “Understanding the ethical issues in such testing, its advantages and its limitations is vital. Get them wrong and we squander opportunities to help this market evolve.

However issues such as under resourcing need to be actively addressed.” The other speakers in the debate will.....continued on page 2
Science and industry working together (from page 1)

include Dr Thomas Stuttaford (The Times) and Professor John Harris (Institute of Law, Medicine and Bioethics, University of Manchester).

The conference includes other subjects of topical interest with a careful balance between science for the professional and for the lay audience. Conference chair, the ACB’s Gilbert Wieringa says “This meeting will particularly welcome outside visitors who wish to know more about diagnostics. There is a long way to go to ensuring the UK makes better use of its diagnostics services."

Dr Gibson agrees “I am delighted that the ACB and BIVDA have got together to take a lead in raising awareness. Science and industry working together, be it in providing and developing new services in the laboratory, delivering more rapid testing nearer to the patient or supporting the evolution of high street diagnostic testing, is paramount to better patient care. Diagnostics has been undervalued for too long”.

Hepatitis C moves up the political agenda

The NHS faces an epidemic of undiagnosed and untreated chronic Hepatitis C patients requiring extensive in-patient treatment as they emerge at the end-stage of the disease. Hepatitis C can be transmitted to partners, and 5 per cent of women with Hepatitis C will transmit it to their babies. Deaths from Hepatitis C are under-reported and sufferers fail to be referred for specialist treatment due to under-diagnosis.

The benefits to patients and healthcare budgets of early diagnosis are clear. The French government is requiring that its healthcare system detect at least 80 per cent of their cases by 2004; in the USA it is public policy that all of their citizens who have had a blood transfusion prior to the availability of donor testing attend their physician for a blood test. Lord Hunt, in debate (Lord’s Hansard, 1 Nov 2000: Column 1031) acknowledged that, “in the future, the NHS will have the ability to prevent this distressing disease, as far as that is possible, and ensure that counselling and testing services are up to the required standard..... We are determined to do what we can to ensure that the services and the prevention of this most distressing disease are given as much priority as is possible”.

Evidence grows that Hepatitis C is not just an issue related to habitual intravenous drug use, but also resides as a chronic infection throughout society. The means for diagnosis and treatment exist, including NICE guidance on therapy.

Adding a test for Hepatitis C to the routine antenatal blood screen would be an effective step towards dealing with the Hepatitis C issue, along with a public awareness of the role of transfusion in passing on the infection prior to the availability of routine donor testing.

Recognition that occasional recreational use of intravenous drugs up to twenty years ago will have led to a reservoir of chronic Hepatitis C infection in middle class, middle England will also remove the assumption that it is only a problem for chronic drug abusers and prison inmates.

The recent meeting in Madrid of the European Association of the Study of the Liver provided evidence that Hepatitis C is destined to become one of the major public health issues of the 21st century. There is little doubt that the UK government must soon act to avoid the suffering and expense resulting from an epidemic of citizens with undiagnosed Hepatitis C swamping hospital beds at the end stage of their condition.
Dr Gozzard thought that providing CRP in a POC setting could provide the solution to these problems. The laboratory was involved from the start, giving invaluable help and support in evaluating and monitoring the performance of the POC analysers produced by ABX Diagnostics.

When the NWCTC opened and went “live” with the analysers there was an immediate, dramatic effect. Patients did not have to wait for their results and staff were less stressed. The laboratory no longer received constant telephone calls for results. In the day unit, decisions on whether patients could receive treatment could be made immediately. And, wider ranging benefits have emerged; utilisation planning in the day ward is easier, patients in clinics ‘own’ their results and patients are able to be discharged from the ward earlier since, as Dr Gozzard commented, “we want to maximise their good days and that means being at home not in hospital”.

Dr Gozzard is unremittingly enthusiastic. “Everyone involved has benefited, laboratory staff, nursing staff, clinicians and, most importantly, patients for whom we are undoubtedly providing a better standard of care than before.”

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Tuberculosis is reappearing as a significant problem for public health in this country. Some parts of the UK already have TB rates as high as in India. Currently TB has a global mortality rate higher than at any other time in history. Multi-drug resistant strains has developed which makes the disease even more difficult to treat. Early detection is vital for both cure and prevention of the spread of the disease.

In vitro diagnostics can play a key role in diagnosis of TB. A new technology has been developed at Oxford University which can be applied to detection of TB and will replace the existing technique of skin testing – this has been in use for the last 100 years. This novel, patented technology studies the individual’s cellular immune response to infection and detects whether the patient is infected and if so, whether the body’s white blood cells are efficiently fighting the infection. The test will also be able to identify TB in those who have not yet developed symptomatic disease. This early detection is essential to prevent the spread and to save lives. Unlike the skin test, this new method also works well in people with weaker immune systems such as children, the elderly and those whose immune systems are suppressed by other diseases such as HIV. In the future, the test may also be applicable, subject to further studies, in diagnosis of other diseases where the cellular immune response is critical such as Hepatitis C, HIV and cancer.

HRH Prince Andrew, pictured during a visit to Ortho-Clinical Diagnostic’s (OCD) medical diagnostics production facility in Cardiff, on Friday 7th March 2003. The Prince was visiting in his capacity as the UK Special Representative for International Trade and Investment, to learn more about the biotech industry. This role has two key elements – the promotion of international trade and the attraction and retention of inward investment. HRH Prince Andrew was surprised by the scale of the operation at the site and the value of biological raw materials used. In 2002 alone, over 61 million tests were manufactured in Cardiff, 92% of which were for export, some with individual chemical components costing as much as 20 times that of gold.

At the front from left to right: Paul Button (OCD); HRH Prince Andrew; The Lord Lieutenant of South Glamorgan, Captain Norman Lloyd-Edwards; Willie Burns, Vice President of OCD and Mari Smith (OCD)

For further information contact BIVDA. Tel: 020 7957 4633 Fax: 020 7957 4644
Email: enquiries@bivda.co.uk Web: www.bivda.co.uk

Acknowledgement: BIVDA would like to thank ABX Diagnostics, Abbott Diagnostics, Omega Diagnostics, Oxford Immunotec and www.stop.org/world.tb.day for their contributions to this newsletter.

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