

Guest editorial

International collaboration in Antarctic medical research

Antarctica has been an ideal continent for international scientific collaboration. The success of SCAR and its multinational core Working Groups, and Groups of Specialists in fostering such collaboration is recognized internationally.

In 1974 the SCAR Working Group on Human Biology and Medicine was organized and Antarctic human studies received a boost. As well as improving both the quality and quantity of research, frequent exchanges of information and data by both meetings and correspondence have led to improved health care services; this SCAR group is unique in having a responsibility for both a support service and for research. Interest in the SCAR Working Group has been widespread and has led to its affiliate membership of the International Union for Circumpolar Health and representation on the governing Council of that body.

The Working Group, by using the past experience of longer serving members, and realistic and internationally acceptable standard protocols, can assist nations in organizing collaborative research over a wintering year. Thus the research is often better planned, and of a higher standard. When these data are combined the sample size is usually sufficient for statistical analyses, solving a particular problem that has always faced researchers studying humans in Antarctica. In addition, cross-cultural studies are possible and the collaboration gives greater prospects of completion and publication in scientifically respected, peer reviewed journals. Currently the new SCAR 'ad hoc' Group on Antarctic/Space-related Human Factors Research is using a standard protocol for collaborative international microbiological studies.

The organization of SCAR Working Groups is based on the right of each national committee to appoint one member to each Working Group. This is important to give each nation access to the expertise and experience available as well as to prospective research programmes, but to those responsible for the running of groups it can also cause frustration to have members who never respond to communications and who never attend meetings. Attendance at meetings often depends on the financial support of national committees and non-attendance of members may be due to a lack of finance. A lack of communication is not, however, excusable for members of international committees. It behoves national committees to choose keen, active workers in each discipline who are prepared to communicate and be active participants.

Unlike other Antarctic research fields human biology research is limited by strong ethical considerations, and by how enthusiastic the potential subjects might be to participate. These constraints, together with need not to interfere with base organization, will always restrict what can be achieved in human research, but a more positive collaboration and rigorous scientific approach by all countries would help to ensure that medical research is given the same resources as other fields.

The proposed SCAR Antarctic Science Conference in September 1991 should show the success of SCAR and its core Working Groups. Above all it will demonstrate that SCAR is a dynamic agency prepared to change with changing times in a effort to continue its sponsorship of Antarctic science. Continuing success lies in scientific collaboration and to this end national committees in all countries must insist on active support for SCAR Working Groups from all whom they appoint.

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