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Abstract:
*The Benefits of International
Collaboration for Blood
Establishments*

Blood establishments have a common goal, to provide patients with access to safe and sufficient blood products at the lowest possible cost. International collaboration can help to achieve that goal, but my contention is that we have only touched the surface of what is possible.

The opportunity to collaborate is there. Whilst we have to be mindful of competition in certain areas of the world, significant parts of the international blood community do not compete with each other, and there are strong networks with access to rich seams of data and information. Collaboration can be low risk and high value in this environment.

The recent ABO Horizon Scanning Report¹ states that “Collaboration within the blood sector between blood services, governments and regulators is well established at a country level. But – globalisation of the blood sector, as for many industries, increases the requirement for collaboration at a regional and global level.”

In the blood sector, opportunities have been identified to improve blood service performance through benchmarking, group purchasing and simple knowledge exchange. The EBA and ABO engage in member consultations on a wide variety of clinical, scientific and business-related topics. These exchanges have proved important for tactical and strategic decision-making by member blood services. In addition, collaboration has assisted in the areas of policy and regulatory influence, horizon scanning, contingency planning and mutual aid in times of need.

The EBA benchmarking initiative started in Helsinki, May 2005, when the EBA Board met to consider how to help members improve

performance. Benchmarking and joint purchasing groups were established. The early years of benchmarking were spent agreeing common key performance indicators and supporting definitions, aided greatly by the work of the ABO Scorecard Group, formed in 2003. The EBA benchmarking group gradually moved from simple data collection to analysis, and on to “deep dives” into performance where significant variation was evident.

Benchmarking has led to the establishment of workshops designed to understand the success factors underpinning good performance, the formation of learning partnerships between blood services, and the creation of a number of informal professional networks. The EBA Flying Squad has also emerged, a successful initiative designed to support EBA members improve performance, utilising several years’ benchmarking data and acquired knowledge. The personal and leadership development for those involved should not be underestimated. Benchmarking ranked first in a recent survey of EBA members in terms of membership value.

Turning to group purchasing, another good example of international collaboration is the Eurobloodpack project. The recent contract awards to framework suppliers represent the culmination of seven years of hard work. The EBA Bloodpack Specification Working Group (2006-10) produced single EurobloodpackTM specifications for BAT and TAT blood pack filtration systems. This provided the springboard for the Eurobloodpack Project Board (2011-13) to oversee a collaborative purchasing tender process involving six EBA members. Crucially, many other EBA and ABO members were named as “beneficiaries” in the commencing OJEU advertisement,

affording the opportunity for them to join the contract at a later point.

The financial savings gained from Eurobloodpack have been unexpectedly high for the majority of participants. The overall qualitative benefits should not be discounted however, with collaboration helping to streamline and improve the individual member approaches taken to product validation, supplier liaison, defect monitoring and industry scanning. Proof of concept established, the EBA Board approved the commencement of the EuroApheresis purchasing initiative in January 2013, together with a third collaborative effort the subject of which has yet to be defined. The feasibility of an EBA Group Purchasing Organisation is likely to be undertaken in 2015/16.

With respect to policy and regulatory influence, we have recently witnessed the effectiveness of negotiations between representatives from the EBA and its members, and the Committee tasked with producing new regulations to control the use of InVitro Diagnostic Devices (IVDs). Looking forwards, it will be essential for EBA members to collaborate in order to appropriately influence the drafting of the new EU Blood and Tissue Directives, which the safety of donors and patients in mind. The ABO has recently instigated a comprehensive review of Risk-Based Decision-Making within the blood sector, prompted by the Toronto Consensus Conference of 2010.

The extensive EBA and ABO blood service networks have enabled improved scanning of the external environment. The EBA has established an effective Emerging Infectious Diseases Monitoring Group, and the Eurobloodpack

1) *Alliance of Blood
Operators, Horizon
Scanning Report 2013*

and EuroApheresis projects have allowed the commencement of a collaborative approach to scanning for new suppliers and new technologies that might provide better product solutions in the future. The ABO has completed the writing of the third annual Horizon Scanning Report, which contains valuable information for members on global and regional environmental trends.

We are also starting to see examples of blood services supporting each other, with the potential for more formalised “mutual support” and contingency planning agreements. These types of arrangements could start to accelerate as blood services at the national and sub-national level recognise where their core strengths lie, and accept that it is not optimal for them to do everything.

There are a number of key enablers for effective international collaboration, but possibly two of the most important are: (i) a willingness to try new things and be brave enough to accept that a collaboration might not work perfectly first time, and to establish proof of concept; and (ii) the need to involve professional experts from their fields, people with a variety of skills and backgrounds, and to maintain respect for their opinion and judgement.

The blood sector may look a very different place in twenty years time. Blood services have a duty to ensure that international collaboration is used to best effect in setting the new landscape.