

Boston University Medical Campus

Community Liaison Committee (CLC)

National Emerging Infectious Diseases Laboratories (NEIDL)

MEETING NOTES

Wednesday June 16, 2021

4:00 pm. * Zoom

Attending

Joe Lillis, CLC; Paulette Ford, CLC; Jean Lee, CLC; Robert Timmerman, CLC; Jim Keeney, CLC; Norm Stembridge, CLC; Norm Stembridge, CLC; Chimel Idiokitas, Director of Community Outreach, BU; Valeda Britton, Executive Director, Community Relations/MED, BU; Elizabeth Leary, Executive Director, Government & Community Affairs; Dr. John H. Connor, BU Department of Microbiology, NEIDL Investigator, BU; Dr. Ronald Corley, BU Department of Microbiology, Director, NEIDL

Welcome

Mr. Idiokitas and Ms. Britton welcomed new CLC members to the group and led a short icebreaker to begin the meeting.

NEIDL Exercise Update:

Ms. Britton and CLC Member Jim Keeney gave an overview of the recent 2021 NEIDL Emergency Response simulation, which involved a workplace violence scenario and a missing vial in the laboratory. These drills are designed to test internal and external responses. All exercises lead to after action reports (AAR) that outline corrective actions to improve emergency responses in future events.

Government & Community Affairs (GCA) Updates:

Ms. Britton updated the Committee on the project undertaken by Government & Community Affairs (GCA) to compile in a central location the University's engagement activity with Greater Boston schools, organizations, nonprofits, trades, boards, and residents. This project showed a vast amount of commitment on the part of BU's faculty, staff and students across 17 BU schools and departments with well over 200 programs and initiatives. This data driven project was amazing in its scope and lent support to our saying that BU is a good neighbor and citizen in deeds and actions that directly impact the City and the Commonwealth. We hope to continue updating this information and adding new programs and initiatives on an annual basis.

Presentation: "Tracking COVID-19 Variants of Concern in the Boston Area"

Dr. John Connor is an Associate Professor of Microbiology and NEIDL Investigator. His presentation focused on his lab's research tracking Covid variants of concern in Boston. Dr. Connor has presented to the CLC before. His first presentation to us was about developing vaccines to protect against the ebola virus. He then came before us to discuss his research with Engineering to develop portable diagnostics to more readily identify ebola and other diseases. However, like most labs at the NEIDL, his research pivoted to studying the virus SARS-CoV-2 and the disease Covid- 19 as the pandemic became more evident.

He noted that the virus genome keeps mutating with the result that there are multiple, slightly different viruses and several appear to make the virus more transmissible in people. Thus, they have been called variants of concern. For example, in India, one variant transmitted to more people, faster and more effectively and caused severe illness and death.

Variants of concern have spurred many questions. Key questions focus on transmissibility, the identity of the virus, effectiveness of contact tracing and vaccines. Dr. Connor and his team are tracking the spread of variants from BU, Tufts and BMC using samples from Covid- 19 tests that read positive. By breaking apart the samples and reading the genome that is present, they can answer whether this is a variant of concern. If the answer is yes, then this information is reported to BPHC, Massachusetts Department of Public Health and contact tracers at BMC, Tufts and BU.

These findings are very helpful to the City and Commonwealth because it allows both to map the spread of these viruses, and help identify whether a specific variant is increasing or decreasing in a specific area, or among a specific population. This information helps drive policy decisions concerning public health measures. Also, by sharing these findings with research partners, Dr. Connor believes this will allow an understanding of whether their methods for contact tracing and quarantine are helping to stamp out the transmission of variants of concern in the population.

NEIDL Director Update by Dr. Ron Corley:

Dr. Corley updated the CLC on recent work being conducted at the NEIDL. As is the case with most research facilities, most, if not all, NEIDL labs have been working on SARS-CoV-2 for the last 14 months. Researchers are now beginning to resume their research with other pathogens.

Dr. Corley mentioned that the one fact that we all learned, was masking does work. In the past, we saw more colds, flu, RSV and other respiratory pathogens. However, because of masking there have been fewer incidents around the world. Scientists and communities are asking whether we should continue masking in the long term?

In response to a question about the "lab leak origin of SARS CoV-2," Dr. Corley reiterated that this is a misleading statement. Labs do not leak pathogens. What is likely is that this virus is naturally occurring and is a spill- over virus, jumping from an animal to a person. What is not known is its initial mode of transmission. While it is most likely that it was incidentally transmitted to humans from the wild, an alternative hypothesis cannot be ruled out: Did

someone work with it in a lab, unknowingly get infected, then unintentionally spread it?
Further scientific research is necessary to identify an outbreak and prevent future pandemics.

Other Topics:

Next meeting – September 15, 2021 at 4pm; Location – Zoom. Dr Nahid Bhadelia will be our
NEIDL speaker.

Meeting adjourned