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Medical genomics gets democratized, some more

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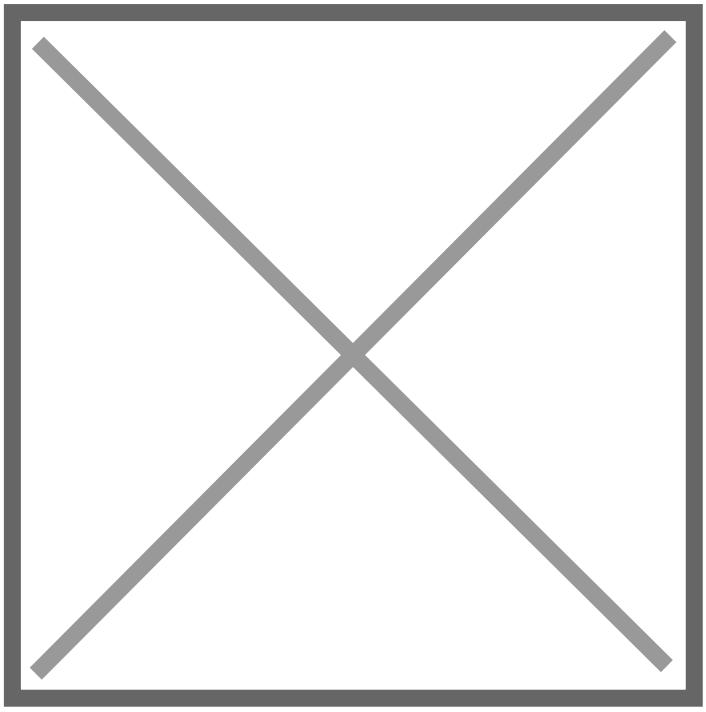

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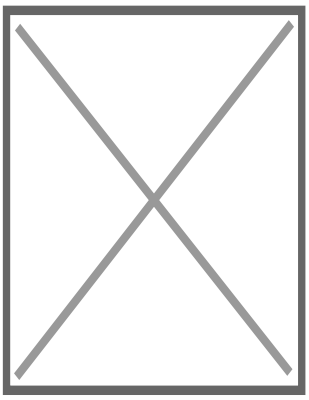

-Dr Edison Liu, President HUGO & Executive Director, GIS, Singapore

Under its current President Dr Edison Liu's leadership, the Human Genome Organization (HUGO) is refocusing on two objectives: Genomic Medicine and Enabling Emerging Economies. In an interview with BioSpectrum, he elaborates on these overarching strategies and outlines the initiatives that are underway at HUGO.

It's almost a year since you have taken over leadership at HUGO. What are the initiatives that are underway?

There are two overarching content strategies that HUGO is focusing on. One is genomic medicine. That is applications in the knowledge form, genomic technologies put into medicine. The second is to work towards engaging and enabling emerging scientific countries in Asia, Latin America, Middle East and Africa. That does not mean we are turning our back on North America and Europe. Many of the developing countries are no longer struggling economies. India is a great example. In fact, these countries are significantly investing in science and technology. Now, it's obvious to everybody that we will find our solutions to human problems through science.

As for the organization itself, at HUGO, I am focusing on organizational sustainability, which essentially involves building a pipeline of resources, creating visibility and vision. We would like to be thought leader in the field we are in.

To achieve this there are functional initiatives underway. The first one is to restructure the office to make it more efficient. So, we have moved it from London to Singapore so that the office is closer to me. Then the Singapore government has put in significant amount of investments for the three years I am holding the office to help establish and manage it.

This is the first meeting under my wing. And you can sense it follows the framework I have outlined. It focuses on genomic medicine and also India as a major component from the emerging countries focus. Subsequently, in 2010 the HGM will be in Montreal, France. In 2011, it will be Dubai and in 2013 in Singapore.

Secondly, apart from improving the quality and impact of HGM meetings I am working on enhancing the portfolio of meetings and workshops. We are developing a series of symposia around issues pertinent to genomics. It covers five areas: genomics and infectious diseases; genomics and incurable diseases; genomics and ethics and society; genomics and human sustainability; genomics and bio-economy. Over next three years each one of these will be punctuated by a conference and we will also be launching a white paper that we would be writing with WHO on each of these areas.

How much influence do you think HUGO commands?

Influence as such is on an upstroke. However, organizations like HUGO cannot command anything nor do they want to. We like to be and are a forum for deep thoughtful discussion, a body where consensus can be heard, an arbitrator in case of complexities, a champion among governments to make the best and ethical science related to genetics possible. In this background, we want to be influential, and I think we are beginning to be so.

We are excited about the future trajectory of HUGO. There is great potential. Practically, there is no other international organization of such history and global scope. There are a few human genetics and disease genetics focused societies but these are regional in nature and that partially comes from the medical framework that springs them to life.

What would be your greatest challenge?

Me greatest challenge is to boost HUGO membership and have more young scientists and researchers on board and inspire them to join the cause of medical genomics. The HUGO membership is open and there is just a basic vetting process to join in.

Also, we are launching a new journal, Genomics Medicine. It will be our first such initiative to express out thoughts. We are also planning a series of niche workshops. I call them enabling workshops. The first one will be in Rotterdam and the second in Singapore and more will follow.

Then, there is the case for education, which has many of our budding initiatives. We are talking to a publishing firm to put together a modular curriculum that can be used by developing countries to get started. The idea is to tailor it to a sufficiently practical level so they can start a small lab and move them to an investigative framework.

Nandita Singh