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American Society for Histocompatibility and Immunogenetics (ASHI) 40th annual meeting, Denver, USA, October 20 - 24, 2014

The 40th ASHI annual meeting provided participants with the latest updates on a variety of topics related to genomics, immunogenetics, immunology, histocompatibility and transplantation all in the field and context of HLA. Since my PhD project is in this field, the conference gave me an excellent opportunity to present and discuss my findings.

There were a number of interesting talks given by the leading scientists in the HLA field but I will focus on a few. Dr. Jill Hollenbach presented the difficulties of self-identification in the American population. Since the American people is a population based on immigrants, not all people know their lineage and do not know what they should fill in as an answer regarding a question about their race. These questions are important in donor selection procedures as certain HLA alleles are common in specific ethnic groups and thus a “unknown” answer will cause difficulties in determining the exact race and its common haplotypes.

Plenary and symposium sessions lectured participants on the role of HLA molecules as risk or protection factors for HIV, influenza, drug and pollen allergies, malaria and narcolepsy. An interesting talk in these sessions was by Dr. Emmanuel Mignot who found a correlation between influenza vaccination and Narcolepsy. This effect was first monitored in Finland where they have seen an increased risk for Narcolepsy in children vaccinated for the H1N1 influenza virus. It is a scary thought that you want to protect your children against one bad influence while exposing them to another one.

Furthermore, exciting new approaches to getting more people transplanted were brought to light by Dr. Dorry Segev. He started a cooperation with Facebook which made it possible to display your donor status. This led to a social move and ultimately showed a massive increase in living donations. However, this is still a hotly debated topic regarding privacy issues and the willingness of people to display their donor status.

During this conference I also had the opportunity to present my findings on unraveling the unknown expression profile of the HLA allele HLA-A*23:19Q. We showed that this allele is a non-expressed variant which would have an impact on donor selection procedures considering patients having this allele. During this talk, fellow scientists had questions and remarks which lead to an interesting discussion.

Overall, I experienced the conference as highly educational and gave me an excellent overview of all the new findings and developments in the HLA field. I would like to thank the NVVI for the travel bursary which enabled me to participate in this great meeting.