

ICCH13 - THE GATEWAY TO HUMAN HEALTH IN THE INTERNATIONAL POLAR YEAR -SUMMARY OF THE CONGRESS HELD IN NOVOSIBIRSK, RUSSIA

The 13th International Congress on Circumpolar Health (ICCH13) which took place on June 12-16, 2006, in Novosibirsk (Akademgorodok), Siberia was a great success.

The ICCH 13 could not come at a more influential juncture, historically. The ICCH13 was significant for three reasons. First, the ICCH13 was the preeminent gateway event for the 2007 – 2008 International Polar. As the International Polar Year process only occurs every 50 years, ICCH13 began a series of scientific processes that will shape arctic research for the next two generations and beyond. Second, ICCH13 represented the first time that human health was introduced into the International Polar Year agenda. All the previous international polar years have concentrated on the physical sciences. Last but not least, the circumpolar health triennial Congresses have not been held by our largest adhering body since we were last in Novosibirsk in October 2-7, 1978, 28 years ago.

Many things have changed since our last circumpolar health visit en masse to Novosibirsk 28 years ago. Our research focus has changed from simply describing elements of high latitude regions to in depth analyses of the many trends in climate change and their effect on the human condition. When coupled with the many effects of social and cultural transition, the impact has been vast.

Backdrop

In the last 28 years Novosibirsk has been one of the best kept secrets in the circumpolar world. Akademgorodok, loosely translated as ‘academic town’, is a sprawling university-like campus located just outside Novosibirsk a lovely pastoral setting. As a whole Novosibirsk is one of the greatest scientific, cultural and industrial centers of Russia. The idea of the Congress was to strengthen the international professional ties between the medical scientists, health care specialists, health administrators, and indigenous peoples of the Far North and Siberia, to enrich the knowledge in the circumpolar health sciences and up to date scientific technologies and to develop new cooperative projects.

The ICCH13 motto was “The North – The Peace Zone”. Many of your colleagues took advantage of this event, to see the unique places on the Earth – Lake Baikal, Altai, and Lake Teletskoe; to cruise the great Siberian Rivers – the Ob, Yenisei, and Lena; to visit the Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre of world reputation, numerous museums, botanic gardens and the zoo with exclusive collections of plants and animals.

Novosibirsk was an excellent setting to explore the current high latitude regions together and discover how the many changes affect the circumpolar human condition. We enjoyed the many benefits of ICCH 13 local organizing committee's efforts, so we can hopefully improve the North – The Peace Zone for all future circumpolar peoples.

“What is the International Polar Year (IPY) 2007-2008?” At its most fundamental level, IPY 2007-2008 is envisioned to be an intense, coordinated campaign of polar observations, research, and analysis that will be multidisciplinary in scope and international in participation. IPY 2007-2008 will provide a framework and impetus to undertake projects that normally could not be achieved by any single nation. It allows us to think beyond traditional borders – whether national borders or disciplinary constraints – toward a new level of integrated, cooperative science.

To that end, the International Union for Circumpolar Health and the Arctic Human Health Initiative have raised human health to one of the major areas of study for the first time in an International Polar Year. Our main focus has been through the Arctic Human Health Initiative, among our many other preparations to maximize the International Polar Year research agenda.

A Series of Firsts

Real-time dissemination online and Compact disc publication It had been so long since an IUCH Congress had convened in Russia, plus the fact that the IUCH had tried to convene a Congress in Russia on at least 2 prior occasions, unsuccessfully, this Congress almost

seemed to be a ‘first’ just for its location, though it was actually the second Congress by 28 years.

On the other hand, ICCH13 was the first Congress ever to publish the content of the Congress online in real time. In other words, all the abstracts were available online at the ICCH13 website during the Congress.

Another first (in the plans) is that the Congress Proceedings are planned to be published within 6 months of the Congress in a compact disc format. At the time of this writing ‘all systems are go’, but frankly the timeline on this process is now more dependent on how quickly the authors respond with the requested manuscripts, than to the efforts of the local organizing committee.

Content of the Congress

The Congress aroused a strong international scientific community: 145 international and 165 Russian participants arrived in Novosibirsk to share their achievements in the field of circumpolar medicine.

The content of this Congress was designed to highlight those areas of research that will shape the next 50 years of the circumpolar health research through the IPY process, e. g., the Congress concentrated on how to best develop collaborative studies across political borders. One excellent example is the International Circumpolar Surveillance system. Other collaborations emphasized mentoring young researchers for the future, e. g., the Fogarty International Center of the National Institutes of Health sponsored several young researchers from around the globe as well as sponsored the Behavioral Health Seminar.

Specifically the Plenary sessions concen-

trated on: the history of the circumpolar health movement, so that we can know how to best proceed in the future, e. g., more interventional studies are needed; emerging infectious diseases; remote sensing; cultures in transition; hepatitis; injury prevention; occupational health; cancer; women's health; nutrition; telemedicine; cardiovascular disease; substance abuse; and community based research to name a few.

Each of the Working Groups was offered a venue to meet. From those sessions some working groups exhibited a true commitment to maximize the Working Group process during these next three years, e. g., already have plans to meet in Banff, Canada in April 2007.

The Legacy of the ICCH13

While the ICCH13 is remarkable for its historical and scientific significance, my most lasting impressions extent beyond that. Actually, I was even more impressed on a personal level by the warmth of our Russian hosts.

In overcoming the logistical challenges that have kept our Congresses outside of Russia for the last 28 years, the local organizing committee stepped up to the challenges. The Siberian Branch (SB) of the Russian Academy of Medical Sciences (RAMS) under the direc-

tion of Valeri Trufakin, Co-chairman of the ICCH 13, President of SB RAMS went above and beyond in their efforts. The General Secretary, Krivoschekov Sergey Georgievich, and the local organizing committee solved air travel problems, overcame visa paperwork, and a myriad other logistics issues to make their guests feel welcome.

Despite a reportedly arid summer climate, it proceeded to rain just as I began my morning jaunt from the hotel to the Hall of the Scientists. As such unprepared for a downpour, one morning I arrived with a wet suit coat. One member of the local organizing committee kindly pulled me aside, had me remove my wet suit coat and prepared a special hot honey tea in corner of the temporary internet café.

I am not sure exactly what 2 carbon fragment spirits she may have also added to the tea as well, but I can say that the flow of the Congress had a very relaxed tone for the rest of that day. When combined with my experience with the birch boughs in the banya, a Russian sauna, on the shores of the Ob Sea, it is and the warmth of our Russian colleagues that I will remember most from IUCH13. It would clearly be a travesty to wait another 28 years for the IUCH to have to wait to return to best kept secret in Russia.

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