
BiCalert

A monthly newsletter by the Malaysian Biotechnology Information Centre (MABIC)
15th August - 14th September 2004 www.bic.org.my

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Message from the Director

Dear Valued Subscriber,

2004 has been a busy and exciting year for MABIC. We have undergone many internal changes in an attempt to better serve our stakeholders. This new and improved version of BiCalert is a testament to that commitment. In here you will find news summaries of the major biotechnology-related stories carried on daily newspapers for the past 30 days, and be kept up-to-date with local and major international happenings. Additionally, we will also review selected MABIC activities in the past month, and will feature some of our other service offerings that may be of interest to you.

We are especially proud to announce a new section called "Book of the Month". BiCalert subscribers can now enjoy attractive discounts on selected titles through our collaboration with AcmaBooks.com Sdn Bhd.

As always, we invite your feedback on how we can make this circulation more applicable and attractive to yourself and your colleagues. This circulation will evolve and be continually updated as necessary to best serve the need of its subscribers. As such your feedback will be invaluable.

Thank you for your patience, and we hope you enjoy this edition of BiCalert.

Sincerely,
Kelvin Keh
Executive Director

News at Home

AgBiotech

More coverage was awarded to the topic of Genetic Modification (GM) recently. A series of articles was penned on the claims and counter-claims surrounding issues in this area.

In a related article, Monsanto's director of scientific affairs, Dr Harvey Glick, was asked about Dr Terje Traavik's claim that Bt toxins purportedly caused various ailments to residents in South Cotabato in Philippines. "The unfortunate thing is that Terje has not released his papers and scientific data backing this claim" said Dr Glick. "More than us, the scientific community have labeled him irresponsible and have asked him to put his findings out in a peer review journal".

Full text articles can be viewed on www.bic.org.my.

Industry & Environment

There seem to be a growing trend in going back to nature. Natural Resource and Environment Minister Datuk Seri Adenan Satem said the market value for herbal products is estimated to be RM8 billion seven years from now. Accordingly, the Government is now actively promoting herbal agro-technology and has allocated RM183.6 million for research and development in this area. Malaysia, as a biodiversity-rich country, is well positioned in its efforts in becoming one of the leaders in the herbal agro-technology area. A recent product of such initiatives was presented in the discovery and development of anti-viral drugs for dengue fever, which were isolated from herbal source.

Moving on to primary industries, local researchers are showing more innovative ways in treating and reusing industrial waste. Prof. Dr. Gan Seng Neon from the Chemistry Department of University Malaya created the environmentally friendly version of polyurethane, a compound used in a variety of everyday items. According to Prof Gan "...palm is our national product, and making polyurethane foam out of it will help diversify the industry. This will ultimately contribute to the national economy".

Full text articles can be viewed on www.bic.org.my .

Event Announcement

TALKING POINT Session 5: "Developments in AgBiotech"

Date: 10th September, 2004 **Venue:** Nikko Hotel, Kuala Lumpur

Who should attend: Mass media, NGOs, religious leaders and other communal communicators

Biotechnology has been a hot topic of late, particularly when referring to issues in the field of Genetic Modification (GM). This session will focus on and address the various issues that form the centre of past and current controversies, and will give participants a chance to interact with scientist and experts that are working in the field. Malaysia's current and future activities in the AgBiotech area will also be reviewed.

For more information, please contact us at: 03-5880-4384 or info@bic.org.my . Places are limited and will be filled on a first come first served basis.

Medical & Health

According to Deputy Health Minister, Datuk Dr. Abdul Latiff Ahmad, the Government spent RM30million on vaccines alone last year. In the face of such demands, we have seen an increase in the number of biotech companies involved in vaccine research in the past few years. An example of this would be Autoimmune Sdn Bhd, who has recently presented its findings on anti-viral dengue fever drugs. The company is now seeking the help of University Malaya's Microbiology Department to verify its results.

At the moment however, "Malaysian companies are still small and yet to reach world-class status" according to Datuk Dr Abdul Latiff Ahmad. He estimates that approximately 70% of all drugs in the local market are imported despite there being a significant growth in the local healthcare industry. Elsewhere, The Institute for Medical Research (IMR) will continue to carry out biomedical research for vaccines that can protect the country from infectious diseases. Health Ministry Parliamentary Secretary Lee Kah Choon added that such work would bring long term benefits, especially in assuring tourists that Malaysia is a safe place to visit.

Full text articles can be viewed on www.bic.org.my .

Trade & Policy

In an effort to jump-start the local biotechnology industry, the Government has recognized the need to have an appropriate legal and policy framework in place. To prepare for this, Malaysia is drafting laws to protect its rights and resources – a move akin to putting the "legal horse" before the "biotechnology cart". According to Mr Adib Rahman, Principal Assistant Secretary in the Conservation and Environment Management Division of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, "in order for biotechnology to fly, there is an urgent need for us to implement two fundamental Bills – on biosafety, and access and benefit-sharing".

Elsewhere, the Government is actively encouraging companies to undertake R&D for agricultural purposes by providing tax incentives that are associated to such activities. According to Finance Ministry Parliamentary Secretary Datuk Helmi Yahaya "Such companies will also get allowances on every industrialized building constructed or acquired amounting to 10% of the initial cost of development, and a further 3% per year".

Full text articles can be viewed on www.bic.org.my .

Investment

News on biotech investment has become somewhat common of late. Although it has long been established that the Government has made funds available for biotech investment (either in research or commercialization), we are now seeing more private companies getting in the act. Gold IS Bhd has recently announced that it is looking to invest up to RM35 million, with specific interest in biosciences and information and communications technology (ICT). Chief Executive Officer Ms Tan Lei Cheng said that the investment would fulfill Gold IS's initial plan of investing RM100 million in new businesses with high growth potential, as it looks to make its mark as one of the stronger private equity investor in the country.

Full text articles can be viewed on www.bic.org.my .

News Around the World

European Commission Approves Biotech Maize

The European Commission has approved a genetically modified maize (NK603) for import, feed use, and industrial processing in the European Union on 19th of July this year. A submission to EU authorities to authorise cultivation of NK603 in the EU is not a part of this decision.

The GM field maize is approved for import and food use in Argentina, Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, Colombia, Japan, Korea, Mexico, the Philippines, Russia, South Africa, Taiwan and the United States and was first approved in 2000.

For more information, please refer to EuropaBio (www.europabio.org)

International Plant Genetic Resources Treaty Enters Into Force

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) announced that the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, an essential legally binding global instrument encouraging sustainable agriculture, has entered into force on 29th of June 2004. 55 countries have now ratified this treaty.

“This is the start of a new era,” said FAO Director-General, Dr Jacques Diouf. “The Treaty brings Governments, farmers and plant breeders together and offers a multilateral framework for accessing genetic resources and sharing their benefits. Humankind needs to safeguard and further develop the precious crop gene pool that is essential for agriculture.”

For more information, please refer to FAO's website (www.fao.org)

AFIC Released Survey Report

The Asian Food Information Centre (AFIC) recently released a survey entitled “Communicating with Consumers on Food Biotechnology: Report of the Asian Food Information Centre 2003 Qualitative Research Results”.

This research was conducted using focus group discussion methods in the Philippines, China and India to assess the perception of adults toward biotechnology foods. The primary goal of this survey was to test and develop appropriate educational messages on issues relevant to food biotechnology.

The majority of consumers adopted an open-minded position towards biotechnology foods and did not reject them per se. Many participants in the discussions clearly had very limited knowledge about food biotechnology but interestingly, increasing knowledge levels were associated with increasingly positive acceptance of biotechnology foods.

For more information, please visit AFIC's website at www.afic.org

Book of the Month



Through our collaboration with AcmaBooks.com, we are proud to bring you a feature title each month that will be highlighted in BICAlerts. Subscribers will enjoy a special 15% rebate* on top of the regular AcmaBooks discounts. MABIC members who are first time AcmaBooks users will also receive a RM10 e-voucher as a welcome gift.



August Feature Title:

BioEvolution: How Biotechnology is Changing Our World

By Michael Fumento

List Price: RM 124.49

MABIC discounted price: RM 93.37**

No area of science is moving faster nor will have a greater impact than biotechnology. BioEvolution is the first book to explain what biotech is all about and to describe the amazing scientific advances that have already been made. Author Michael Fumento shows how biotech is changing our lives and will do so even more dramatically in the near future.

Reporting from Ground Zero of experimentation and clinical trials, Fumento shows how biotechnology has already demonstrated the potential to cure almost any disease, extend human lifespans well past the 120-year range, and wipe out not only famine but malnutrition while using less land, less water, and fewer chemicals. He discusses the miracle drugs and treatments in the biotech pipeline—scientific innovations that will change medicine over the next decades, eliminating diseases such as diabetes, AIDS, and Alzheimer's, and making cancer into a manageable disorder rather than a death sentence.

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WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

Do you have a particular title that may interest other BICAlert subscribers? Let us know, and we can try to have the title featured in upcoming BICAlert editions.

We would also welcome submission of reviews of current or future titles. Submission and inquiries can be directed to bicalerts@bic.org.my.

Hope to hear from you soon.

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This service was brought to you by the Malaysian Biotechnology Information Centre (MABIC), in association with AcmaBooks.com Sdn Bhd.

Media discovers nature through biotechnology

The Malaysian Biotechnology Information Centre (MABIC) organised a workshop for the media focusing on biodiversity and nature, which was attended by 20 representatives from the local broadcast and print media industry on 30th of June.

This 4th installment of MABIC's Talking Point session, titled "Discovering Nature: Biotechnology as a tool", organised in collaboration with Monash University Malaysia (MUM), was geared towards assisting the media in understanding the complex development in this area besides providing participants an insight into current issues on biotechnology – its uses and its impact on the environment.



MABIC's Executive Director, Mr Kelvin Keh, commented on the role of media as a primary source of information for the layperson. He said that the media has had, and will continue to have, a great degree of influence on how matters are perceived by the general public.

"This is the challenge that you are facing. To draw a sound and factual picture of scientific developments as they take place, taking into account not only the scientific impact, but also the economic, social and environmental factors that are associated with such technologies. In the

area of biotechnology, a hotly debated area of science in its own right, this has become even more critical"

The workshop also featured a talk from Dr Koshy Philip, Consultant Biotechnologist with Mineway (M) Sdn Bhd. Dr Philip presented on the current state of Malaysian biotechnology industry, sustainable harvesting of natural resources for commercial use, and the role of the industry in conservation and environmental preservation.

The laboratory sessions, led by Dr Khoo Kong Soo, a lecturer at MUM, provided an opportunity for participants to better understand the area of bioprospecting. A tour to Dr Khoo's aquaria was followed up with exercises to extract organic compounds from a marine source - a sea weed called 'sea grapes'. Subsequent analysis was done and participants were shown the various techniques of identifying useful compounds for possible medicinal use.



The session was rounded off with a Panel discussion moderated by Mr Keh. Panelists include Dr Mohd Omar (Senior Lecturer, MUM), Dr Sundari Ramakrishna (Director of Wetlands International), and Ms Saradambal Srinivasan (Scientific Officer with WWF). The speakers also sat in on the panel and contributed to a lively discussion on the role of biotechnology in Malaysia today.

BICnews 6 Released

Prospecting Nature: Impact of biotechnology on biodiversity

The Malaysian Biotechnology Information Centre (MABIC) has recently released the 6th issue of its BICnews report titled "Prospecting Nature: Impact of Biotechnology on Biodiversity". This report is now available for download at MABIC's website.

What is biodiversity?

In recent years, the term biodiversity has been frequently used in the mainstream media, and more countries are showing keen interest in addressing biodiversity issues both at the local and international level. Malaysia is a megadiversity country and is one of the world's seventeen hotspots of biodiversity. The flora of Malaysia is exceedingly rich. This in turn attracts many bioprospectors to our forests.



Rafflesia, an endangered species is indigenous to jungles of Southeast Asia

How does biotechnology developments affect biodiversity?

The report covers a broad range of topics associated with biotechnology developments directly affecting the environment. Various methods of conservation are discussed, as are the involvement of Malaysia in international agreements on biodiversity and conservation. Issues such as biopiracy and sustainable bioprospecting are also discussed.

These are just some of the questions addressed in this edition of BICNews. Kindly visit MABIC's website to download a free copy of this report.

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