

Dear Sarah,

We talked the other day about models used for culture collection organisation in different countries. You may not need this information, but I thought I would email you the web site addresses of a few culture collections to illustrate the different approaches. In the UK there are several different collections which are coordinated as the United Kingdom National Culture Collection (UKNCC). They have a common web site and access to on-line information. The collections operate relatively independently and obtain their operating funds from government and various host organisations and government departments. The web site is <http://www.ukncc.co.uk/>. The Belgian Coordinated Collections of Microorganisms (BCCM) <http://www.belspo.be/bccm/> consists of several research-based collections coordinated and financed by the Federal Office of Scientific, Technical and Cultural Affairs.

Other countries have a single national collection such as the German Collection of Microorganisms and Cell Cultures (DSMZ) <http://www.dsmz.de/dsmzhome.htm>, the American Type Culture Collection (ATCC) <http://www.atcc.org/>, or the Japan Collection of Microorganisms <http://www.jcm.riken.go.jp/>. However, there are also many specialist research and institutional collections which provide very useful functions in conserving and using microbial biodiversity but do not provide the same level of services offered by the national collection. There are about 50 collections in Australia of various sizes and quality but there is no coordination or mechanism for direct financial support. Although these collections provide some cultures on request it is not usually their main function. Our collection, the Australian Collection of Microorganisms (ACM) which is the University of Queensland collection is the most diverse collection of bacteria in Australia and the major supplier of cultures to industry and science. It is the preferred supplier of NATA (National Association of Testing Authorities) for their accredited laboratories. As laboratories became aware of the diversity and quality of our collection they turned to us for supply of cultures in the absence of a true nationally funded collection. We have thus operated as a de facto national collection for the past 30 years while I have been curator, albeit with diminishing resources in recent years. We supply cultures to around 400 laboratories in Australia.

In my view, Australia needs a two tier system. It needs a properly funded national collection to coordinate culture needs for science and industry in Australia and provide the range of services I listed in my paper, underpinned with a network of specialists research collections. All need to be part of a distributed information network. In the absence of a national policy and funding mechanism in Australia we are falling behind our competitors in other countries rapidly and it will be very difficult to be part of the proposed globalisation initiatives for cultures and bioinformatics foreshadowed in the OECD report on "Biological Resource Centres: Underpinning the Future of Life Sciences and Biotechnology" unless the situation improves markedly and quickly.

I hope this is helpful. Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can be of further assistance.

Kind regards

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