

# Prologue: 2009 Joint Meeting of Spondyloarthritis Research and Therapy Network (SPARTAN) and International Genetics of Ankylosing Spondylitis (IGAS)

JOHN D. REVEILLE and DANIEL O. CLEGG

**ABSTRACT.** In July 2009, a 3-day conference was held in Houston, Texas, USA, by members of several groups: the Spondyloarthritis Research and Therapy Network (SPARTAN); the International Genetics of Ankylosing Spondylitis (IGAS); and interested members of the Pan American League of Associations of Rheumatology (PANLAR). The purpose of this meeting was to bring together physician scientists, clinicians, and educators from around the world who are working together to improve their understanding of spondyloarthritis (SpA). In addition to the annual educational and Fellows sessions for SPARTAN members, the conference included a one-day international meeting dedicated to the role of HLA-B27, along with a series of sessions that summarized advances among various collaborative groups and defined opportunities for future genetic initiatives. This supplement provides a review of the SPARTAN and IGAS meetings. (J Rheumatol 2010;37:2604–5; doi:3899/jrheum.100888)

*Key Indexing Terms:*

ANKYLOSING SPONDYLITIS  
SPONDYLOARTHRITIS

EPIDEMIOLOGY  
SPONDYLOARTHROPATHIES

The Spondyloarthritis Research and Therapy Network (SPARTAN) is a network of healthcare professionals in North America who are dedicated to research, awareness, and treatment of ankylosing spondylitis (AS) and related forms of spondyloarthritis (SpA). The group was founded in 2003 and is funded through educational grants from companies with an interest in this area of medicine. There is a steering committee of 10 individuals, 4 of whom form the executive committee. In addition, there is a research committee, an education committee, and other committees formed ad hoc to promote SPARTAN initiatives. SPARTAN has 67 members throughout North America, including rheumatologists and government agency representatives. Members meet yearly to promote research, education, and treatment of SpA<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>.

The International Genetics of Ankylosing Spondylitis (IGAS) consortium was established in 2002 with the goal of coordinating international efforts in gene-mapping studies in AS. An initial meeting was held at Keble College, Oxford, and meetings have since been held approximately yearly. IGAS has initiated many collaborations, including a pub-

lished metaanalysis of linkage scans, as well as a large-scale prospective metaanalysis of interleukin 1 gene variants and AS<sup>5,6</sup>.

In July 2009, a 3-day conference was organized in Houston, Texas, USA, for the following: the annual meeting of SPARTAN; a working meeting of IGAS (organized by Matthew A. Brown, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia, and John D. Reveille); and a one-day workshop on HLA-B27 (organized by Joel Taurog, University of Texas, Southwestern Medical Center, Dallas, TX). For the first time, the SPARTAN meetings were held in collaboration with a number of interested members of the Pan American League of Associations of Rheumatology (PANLAR). This supplement provides a summary of the proceedings of these meetings.

## **Role of HLA-B27 in SpA**

On the first day of the conference, several dozen investigators gathered for a one-day roundtable discussion of the role of HLA-B27 in the pathogenesis of AS and related disorders. The event was funded by the US National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS) and was moderated by Joel Taurog. Because the molecular basis for the association between HLA-B27 and AS remains unknown, this meeting was dedicated to the fascinating and highly relevant question of how HLA-B27 confers susceptibility to SpA. The workshop brought together most of the investigators who work on HLA-B27, along

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*From the University of Texas, Houston, Texas; and University of Utah School of Medicine, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA.*

*J.D. Reveille, MD, University of Texas; D.O. Clegg, MD, University of Utah School of Medicine.*

*Address correspondence to Dr. D.O. Clegg, University of Utah School of Medicine, 50 North Medical Drive, Salt Lake City, UT 84132.*

*E-mail: Daniel.Clegg@hsc.utah.edu*

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with others with expertise in major histocompatibility complex (MHC) biology or other relevant areas<sup>7</sup>.

### Genetic Basis of SpA

On the second day of the conference, a joint SPARTAN/IGAS meeting was held, with the overall theme of the genetic basis of SpA. Moderators were Matthew A. Brown and John D. Reveille. Presentations were made on the future of human genetic studies; microbes, SpA, and innate immunity; susceptibility of AS to the MHC and non-MHC; and discussions of the genetics of psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis, uveitis, inflammatory bowel disease, and enteropathic arthritis<sup>8</sup>.

### Current Controversies in SpA

On the third day, members of SPARTAN and IGAS met independently. The overall theme of the SPARTAN annual meeting was current controversies in SpA, and the moderators were Michael Weisman (Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Los Angeles, CA, USA) and Ruben Burgos-Vargas (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico). Topics discussed during the meeting included an update on the epidemiology of AS, axial SpA, and inflammatory back pain; the adequacy of the modified Stoke Ankylosing Spondylitis Spine Score to assess radiographic involvement; the helpfulness of magnetic resonance images in assessing disease progression; the reliability of metrology in assessing damage; and whether biologic agents alter the course of AS<sup>9</sup>.

### Epidemiology of AS

The working meeting of IGAS members was moderated by Robert Inman (Toronto Western Hospital, Toronto, Canada) and Matthew Brown. The current genetic epidemiology of AS in Europe, Asia, and North and South America was explored, with individual presentations from representatives of the United Kingdom, France, Sardinia, Portugal, Spain, Korea, Taiwan, China (Guangzho and Shanghai), Australia, USA, Canada, Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil. A collaboration was planned among the presenters and their consortia to engage in a comprehensive study of the genetics of AS via The ImmunoChip Consortium<sup>10</sup>.

### Conclusion

The combined meetings were productive, insightful, and rewarding. They provided a forum for scientific collaboration and information sharing among an international group of physician scientists and educators. Interested fellows, research trainees, and junior faculty were also involved with the goal of stimulating additional research interest and commitment.

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