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Expanding the BBMRI-ERIC Directory into a Global Catalogue of COVID-19–Ready Collections: A Joint Initiative of BBMRI-ERIC and ISBER

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THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC continues to impact us globally. It is urgent and important that biobanking communities and research infrastructure work together to gain access to quality-defined biological materials and data that leads to understanding that combats the virus. As part of the global biobanking communities' response to the COVID-19 pandemic, ISBER and BBMRI-ERIC are expanding the BBMRI-ERIC directory¹ to include established biobanks with COVID-19–ready collections from Europe² as well as around the globe. This joint initiative will provide a single point of contact for biobankers to engage with those on the front line of COVID-19 research to find the solutions needed to move us out of this pandemic. The impact of connecting researchers and industry scientists with biobanks that are making samples and data sets available to assist with COVID-19–related research efforts from all regions of the world will be seen in (1) increased number of well-annotated and curated tissue specimens contributing to cutting-edge research accompanied with clinically relevant data, (2) providing investigators with a global reach of biospecimens available, (3) reduction in time for organizations sourcing relevant tissue to support their research, and (4) a resource that represents the global presentation of COVID-19 infection.

It is vital that we seek opportunities to provide solutions that enable research built on robust and systematic tissue collection practices and on integration of data that are relevant for clinical and biological research. Biobanks have much to offer our biomedical research community and many ISBER members are actively involved in facilitating COVID-19 research. Indeed since the onset of the pandemic, ISBER and BBMRI-ERIC have been prominent in drawing biobanking experts together into discussion and education forums to expand on their experience in operating biobanks during a global crisis.³ In many cases, the prominence of the biobanking response has been found in their ability to respond to the bio-

logical material collection and associated data needs of investigators at the forefront of COVID-19 research, or for established biobanks to be repurposed to meet the need for increased clinical testing in overloaded regions.

It is critical that the availability of these biospecimens be made known to the wider research community. A directory was announced to the biobank community through both ISBER and BBMRI-ERIC social media and marketing in July 2020. Through this initiative, our organizations have responded quickly to match burgeoning biospecimen collections with scientists around the world involved in SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19 research.

This collaboration leverages the strengths of one of the world's largest catalogues of samples and data sets, the BBMRI-ERIC directory, with >600 biobanks and ~2500 collections listed. Owing to the global scale and urgency of the COVID-19 pandemic, BBMRI-ERIC is expanding its directory beyond its European Member States (National Nodes) to allow biobanks around the world to list any COVID-19–ready samples and data sets.

For researchers, the directory offers a means of finding samples and data, whereas for biobanks it offers a platform to share the existence of their collections and services and to connect with researchers interested in them.⁴ Users can browse collections or search using the directory's new COVID-19 filters to find relevant samples.

If interested in accessing samples and data for their projects, the user registers for an account and then, using the BBMRI-ERIC Negotiator tool,⁵ can negotiate access to biobanks from their search results. The negotiator can handle parallel negotiations with many biobanks at the same time and streamline the whole process. Material transfer and data transfer agreements along with access costs are negotiated confidentially between the users and biobanks using the capabilities of the newly released Negotiator 2.0.

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BBMRI-ERIC supports and promotes compliance with data protection regulations, such as General Data Protection Regulation in the countries of European Union, and offers guidance on ethical, legal, and societal issues through its ELSI Helpdesk.* A general IT helpdesk is available for questions related to the directory and negotiator.†

Interested biobanks are invited to fill out the initial questionnaire that captures general information about the biobank and the nature and number of collected biospecimens as well as access contact details. The directory does not require a detailed inventory of the biobank holdings nor biospecimen-specific detail. The requestor will receive follow-up information on how to register their collections effectively. Eligible biobanks can register through the following link: <https://www.bbmri-eric.eu/services/isber-biobank-collaboration/>.

Registration in the BBMRI-ERIC directory/negotiator is free for biobanks, and use of the directory/negotiator is free to all users from academia and industry. Costs related to accessing the samples and data are negotiated bilaterally between the user and biobank. Interested ISBER biobanks with COVID-19–relevant collections or services are invited to fill out the initial questionnaire‡ and they will be registered in the directory. After that, they will be invited to register in the negotiator service to be able to handle the access requests. We welcome the international biobank community to make use of this initiative as we seek to support all efforts to combat the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic that will lead us to a meaningful and effective solution.

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