Congress travel report

With the generous support of a travel grant from the Swedish Society for Clinical Immunology and Transfusion Medicine (KITM), I had the privilege of attending the 39th International Congress of the International Society of Blood Transfusion (ISBT) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, from 20-24 June 2026. The congress was hosted at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre (KLCC), organized jointly by ISBT and the Malaysian Blood Transfusion Society (MBTS).

The congress brought together clinicians, scientists, and transfusion medicine professionals from around the world to share the latest advances of transfusion medicine and cell therapies, from blood group immunogenetics and donor management to clinical transfusion practice and crisis preparedness.

Day 1 – 20 June: Working Party Meeting

The congress week opened with an invitation to attend the Business Meeting of the ISBT Working Party for Red Cell Immunogenetics and Blood Group Terminology, held on the morning of June 20th. The working party is responsible for the official classification and nomenclature of blood group systems worldwide, and attending as an external guest was an exceptional opportunity.

The meeting began with a welcome to three newly appointed members, before moving to the adoption of minutes from the 9th Virtual Business Meeting held earlier in the year.

The scientific centrepiece of the meeting was the presentation of a candidate for a new blood group system. Nicole Thornton (Bristol, UK) presented a proposal for a novel system designated JAMA, carried on Junctional Adhesion Molecule-A (JAM-A). This was followed by two submissions of new blood group antigens: Yanli Ji (Guangzhou, China) presented a novel low-prevalence antigen within the Diego system (DI/SLC4A1), arising from the missense variant c.1874A>C (p.Glu625Pro) identified in a Chinese pedigree, and Symsia Deegan and Genghis Lopez (Brisbane, Australia) presented a new high-prevalence antigen proposed as LUWIN within the Lutheran blood group system, associated with BCAM c.1042G>A (p.Val348Met).

Attending this meeting gave me a unique window into the inner workings of international blood group science, the collaborative spirit, and the careful process by which new knowledge becomes official nomenclature.

Day 2 – 21 June: Academy Day and Opening Ceremony

The second day was dedicated to the ISBT Academy Day, an education-focused programme designed to offer depth across core topics in transfusion medicine. I attended Session 6 – Immunohaematology I and Session 8 – Immunohaematology II, both of which provided excellent and up-to-date overviews of the field.

Session 6 covered fundamental and clinically important aspects of antibody investigation, red cell alloimmunisation, and compatibility testing, with speakers addressing the growing role of molecular methods alongside classic serology. Session 8 extended these themes to more complex immunohaematological scenarios, including the management of patients with multiple alloantibodies and rare antibody specificities. Together, the two sessions gave a compelling picture of

immunohaematology in transition, moving steadily towards a more genomics-driven and individualised approach to patient care.

The day concluded with the official Opening Ceremony, which featured welcome addresses from ISBT leadership and the Malaysian Blood Transfusion Society. The ceremony set a warm and ambitious tone for the congress, emphasising the importance of international collaboration and knowledge exchange in advancing transfusion medicine globally.

Beyond the scientific sessions, there was a large exhibition area which offered a valuable opportunity to engage with the transfusion medicine industry. The exhibition floor brought together reagent manufacturers, instrumentation suppliers, and diagnostic companies, all showcasing their latest products and innovations. Walking the stands provided a useful overview of current and emerging technologies, from automated blood grouping platforms and high-throughput genotyping solutions to next-generation transfusion management systems. Conversations with company representatives were informative and gave a real sense of where the industry is heading, complementing the academic content of the congress.

Day 3 – 22 June: Scientific Sessions and Poster Presentation

The third day was among the most scientifically intensive of the congress. I began with the session Phenotype, Genotype, Perfect Match, which addressed the increasingly central question of how blood group genotyping can improve donor-recipient matching, particularly for patients with chronic transfusion needs such as those with sickle cell disease or thalassaemia. Speakers presented data on implementation strategies and the practical challenges of integrating genotyping into routine blood banking workflows. The session reinforced the sense that the field is undergoing a genuine shift, from serology-based to genomics-based compatibility assessment.

This was followed by the Presidential Award Symposium, in which my Ph.D. supervisor Professor Martin L Olsson, M.D., Ph.D., was presented with the ISBT Presidenial Award 2026 in recognition of his outstanding and longstanding contributions to blood group genetics and transfusion medicine. The session provided a fascinating overview of his research legacy and its far-reaching impact on the field.

The session Digging Deep into Blood Group Systems offered an in-depth exploration of the molecular biology, structural biology, and clinical significance of selected blood group systems.

The afternoon brought the poster session, where I had the opportunity to present my own work. My poster was titled: *Interindividual differences in H blood group antigen levels on group O red blood cells – a striking and previously unrecognized phenomenon*

The poster attracted considerable interest from fellow delegates. Discussions at the poster board were lively, offering the chance to connect with researchers from several countries working on related questions. Presenting original findings at an international forum was both challenging and deeply rewarding.

Day 4 – 23 June: Clinical Perspectives and Interactive Session

The fourth day featured a mix of clinical and applied content. The session Form, Function, and Hard to Find focused on rare blood group antigens and the practical challenges of sourcing compatible blood

for patients with rare phenotypes. Speakers from national and international rare blood programmes shared strategies and lessons learned, highlighting the indispensable role of international cooperation and well-curated databases in ensuring access to rare units.

Preparing the Blood System for Conflict and Crisis addressed an increasingly pressing global topic: how blood supply systems can be made resilient and functional under conditions of extreme stress, whether from natural disaster, pandemic, or armed conflict. Speakers from various regions shared concrete field experiences and policy recommendations, and the discussions were very inspiring.

The day ended on a lighter note with Interactive Immunohaematology Case Studies and Blood Group Bingo, one of the most enjoyable and memorable sessions of the entire congress. Complex immunohaematological cases were presented and worked through interactively with the audience, and the Blood Group Bingo format proved to be a brilliantly effective pedagogical tool. The session demonstrated that science and genuine fun are not mutually exclusive, and it generated an impressive level of engagement across the room.

In the evening, ISBT had organized a banquet which started with a mingling session, continued with a nice dinner with Malaysian cuisine before concluding the night on the dance floor where live music and a DJ kept the majority from the large crowd on their feet until late.

Day 5 – 24 June: Final Day

The final day of the congress opened with the session Blood Groups and the Database in Clinical Management, which explored how blood group data stored in patient records and laboratory information systems can be leveraged to support better clinical decision-making and enhance patient safety. Speakers addressed opportunities arising from digitalisation and database interoperability, and discussed the progressive integration of genomic blood group data into clinical systems.

Reflections and Conclusions

Attending the 39th ISBT International Congress in Kuala Lumpur was an exceptional experience, both scientifically and personally. The congress offered an opportunity to follow the cutting edge of immunohaematology and blood group biology, to present my own research to an international audience, and to connect with leading scientists and clinicians from across the globe. Among them were several Swedes, including three from Lund, namely lab manager Dr. Yan Quan Lee, Adjunct Professor Jill Storry and the above-mentioned Professor Martin L Olsson.

Kuala Lumpur proved to be a vibrant and welcoming host city, and the Local Organising Committee had assembled a congress programme of consistently high quality, striking a strong balance between fundamental research, clinical application, and future perspectives.

I am deeply grateful to KITM for the travel grant that made this participation possible. The knowledge, and inspiration I have brought back will be of lasting value to my doctoral research and to my continued development as a scientist in the field of transfusion medicine.

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