



Vision On Information, Confidence & Engagement

VOICE 2013 – An Overview by Margaret Grayson

I had been talking about “the course” for weeks and now it was Monday morning, 9am, - excitement, anticipation and trepidation - a mixture of my feelings at the start of the VOICE course at Barts Cancer Institute. I was quickly put at ease as I meet the other course members and the staff. Monday to Thursday mornings comprised a series of lectures and the afternoons involved practical learning in the lab. The first series of lectures on basic cell biology was the foundation for the rest of the week – how normal cells behave, each part of the cell and its “job”; the structure of DNA and how that is copied every time a cell divides. This lead on to what happens to normal cells to make them cancerous and the part oncogenes and tumour suppressor genes play in the hallmarks of cancer. Amazing facts about my body – over 200 types of cells; over 100 trillion cells; 1,000million cells in 1gram of tissue (about the size of a sugar cube). We looked at how cells grow, survive or die and how they talk to each other in cell signalling; it was interesting to understand this in relation to the effect of Tamoxifen and AI Inhibitors on cells.

On Wednesday we had four clear and easy to understand presentations on the facts about breast, leukaemia/lymphoma, colon and pancreatic cancers. Epidemiology, understanding risk and causality was covered on Thursday along with biomarkers – a word heard often in cancer research so it was helpful to learn what they are and how they are used. Friday was Clinical Trials and included a practical workshop. We had a useful outline to help critique a published paper.

The course was a series of personal “firsts” for me in relation to the lab sessions. It was a tremendous experience which highlighted the patience and passion of the researchers in their work. From learning to pipette; extracting and processing DNA; using a microscope to observe the appearance of different cancer cells and testing the sensitivity of cells to cytotoxic drugs. The most memorable session was in the pathology lab as breast tissue was processed for diagnosis and tissue banking, following the process through the various stages. As a mastectomy patient, I was so impressed at the way the pathologist and all the staff handled the tissue with such care and respect.

Thank you to Louise Jones, all the Barts staff and the other course members for a week of learning and fun in lectures, lab and our social activities (not forgetting the cakes).The postcard I completed on Monday morning about what I hoped to get from the course I added on Friday - “got it and much more!” The knowledge gained from this amazing week will be used as a building foundation in my understanding of research as I partner, as a patient advocate, with researchers in the Clinical Research Division and Trial Adoption meetings.

If you get the opportunity to be part of VOICE next year please take don’t hesitate to take a place on this amazing course! Well done to ICPV and Barts for this 1st in the UK!