

Independent Cancer Patients' Voice (ICPV)

Science for patient advocates Course. Bart's Cancer Institute

On Sunday the 1st of September sixteen patient advocates were drawn to together at the Bart's Cancer Institute in London for what was to be an intensive course on the Science of Cancer. Each of us arrived from different parts of the country with Scotland, Wales and England represented, but perhaps more importantly despite our varied ages, work experiences and our different knowledge as public/patient representatives, we were united in one aim to learn more about the disease which had affected our lives.

We were welcomed to the Institute, settled into our rooms and then met for an Italian meal close to the Institute. This informal first gathering was to set the tone for the rest of the week, with Bec, Adrienne, Chris and Maggie, from ICPV, putting us at our ease in an informal setting.

This welcome continued the next day as we met the course leader Professor John Marshall, whose informal style eased us into his introduction to cancer biology. This was the start of a journey into the subject, developed further by Dr Richard Grose on day 2, leading on to sessions on day 3 and 4, led by Professor Louise Jones, with six different speakers talking about their speciality; from head and neck to prostate cancer and all points in-between. Each talk providing an insight into the particular problems and challenges of the specific cancer. The last morning was taken up with learning how to read a scientific paper, which was interesting and very relevant. The lectures were well designed, informative and set at a level that was understandable but challenging.

The lab sessions were interesting and opened a window into a world that few lay people get to see. Excitingly we were shown how to do a DNA fingerprint-on our own specimen, watched a tumour being processed in pathology and learnt how to grow and observe cells under a microscope. I have a new found respect for the painstaking nature of laboratory research.

What was impressive was the way each session, be it lecture or lab based, built on the previous lesson so the path of our learning was easily followed. I am also amazed, although my age may have a bearing on this, when interacting with young researchers, how bright, innovative and personable they are. How lucky we are that these young people are looking after us and our families' futures. These younger researchers, of course, take their lead from the senior members of staff and I have nothing but praise for the humility and respect we received from these leaders. We were made to feel a part of the Bart's Cancer Institute, to the extent that we were extremely privileged to be invited to join their 10th anniversary boat trip on the Thames.....a real highlight of the week.

These courses require a high level of planning and organisation, as well as a firm hand in order to make them successful. Each of these objectives was achieved and each hurdle overcome with a minimum of fuss. An atmosphere of sharing and communication was created which meant that very quickly we became an effective group. The extra-curricular activities, which included a tour of The Charterhouse, an alms house with an interesting and chequered history, extended and enhanced the experience.

The final night course dinner was an enjoyable evening as we all joined together as friends and shared the experience of a wonderful week because as a group, either Scientists, facilitators or delegates we had quickly come together enjoying each other's company, sharing knowledge and skills from the classroom and outside.

I was delighted to be part of this course and armed with new information about how cancer starts and the new ways that researchers are learning to combat it not only makes me optimistic about the future but also, the experience both in and out of the classroom will serve to enhance my effectiveness as a public patient representative.

Stephen F Thomas, September 2014