The American Association for Cancer Research Annual Meeting – Philadelphia PA 18-22 April 2015

Philadelphia PA, the home of the American Association for Cancer Research (AACR) along with members of this year's Scientist↔Survivor programme

"The American Association for Cancer Research (AACR) is the world's first and largest scientific organization focused on every aspect of high-quality, innovative cancer research, from bench to bedside. The mission of the AACR and its more than 35,000 members in all fifty states and around the world is to prevent and cure cancer through research, education, communication, and collaboration. Our members include basic, translational and clinical researchers, physicianscientists, ***patient advocates*** and other leaders in the cancer research and care community".

"AACR Annual Meeting April 2015: Advocates make their presence felt" *Quote from the official blog of AACR*

The Scientist↔Survivor programme is centred on several AACR scientific meetings and gives an opportunity of patient advocates to learn about cancer research and to interact with scientists, doctors, and other health professionals. It is a well-structured programme, for instance, the special lectures (special interest sessions) give the advocates the opportunity to hear from expert researchers using less formal language. Plus small group discussions and exchange of information on the latest aspects of cancer research.

I joined thirty other advocates at this annual scientific meeting in Philadelphia, having heard about the opportunity through being involved in research advocacy – particularly through my membership of Independent Cancer Patients Voice (ICPV). I duly completed the application last November and learnt in January I had been awarded a bursary to attend. So I gathered with a small group of cancer patient advocates and along with scientific and advocate mentors, began an intensive five-day schedule. Our aim was to learn about cancer science and research to enable us to go back out to our "constituencies" with this new knowledge

and put the learning experience into practice in our advocacy back home. And along the way lasting key relationships were made.

Tools for the Conference – Hefty Programme and Badge !

Approximately 19,000 delegates, including scientists and clinicians attended this year's conference in the Philadelphia Convention Centre. The centre covers approximately three blocks and is huge !

The Scientist↔Survivor programme consists of special interest sessions where cancer researchers present their latest findings. Here follows some of this meeting's presenters:

- Peter Kuhn, PhD a physicist and director of the Kuhn Lab at the University of Southern California, talked about identifying circulating tumour cells in the blood which can potentially lead to earlier and less invasive diagnoses.

Peter Kuhn used the example of lung cancer to show how testing the blood for circulating tumour cells, combined with analysing images from a PET scan can diagnose lung cancer more accurately than using just one method alone.

- Carolyn Compton, MD, PhD, a pathologist who teaches medical students at Arizona State University and the Mayo Clinic gave us a mini medical school session focussing on the fundamentals of cancer and treatment.

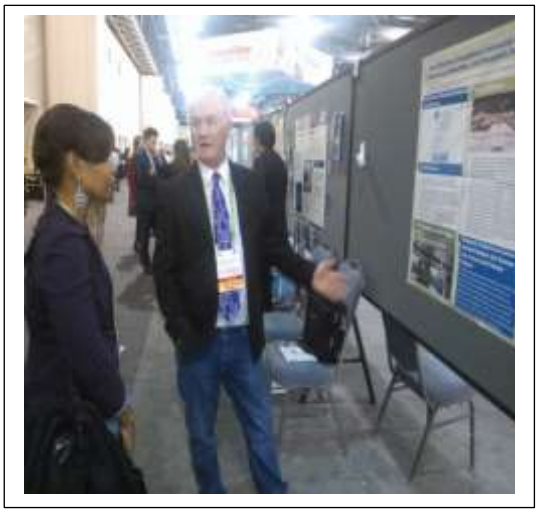
Carolyn Compton explained that even with new advances, a large part of cancer prevention still falls to each individual. At least half of cancer incidences can be attributed to environmental factors like cigarette smoking, obesity, etc. And that the most common risk factor is advancing age. She talked about screening tests having shortcomings, for instance mammograms can deliver false positive results, PSA (prostate) tests can also provide a false positive test.

Despite setbacks such as these Carolyn Compton remains optimistic, noting that 65% of patients in the US today diagnosed with cancer will live at least five years post treatment.

- Drew Pardoll, MD, PhD, director of cancer immunology at the John Hopkins Kimmel Cancer Centre in Baltimore, talked to us about his thirty year journey to find effective cancer treatments in immunotherapy.

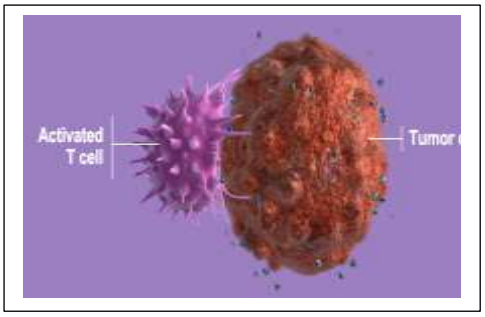
Drew Pardoll shared information about his personal thirty year journey looking at how the immune system could overcome some cancers. His work led him to develop a cancer vaccine GVAX, an immunotherapy that's currently being tested in clinical trials for patients with pancreatic cancer, colorectal cancer, and acute myeloid leukaemia. As time went on more "tools" became available, in the wake of molecular biology and genomics. In 2002 work began on developing antibodies against PD-1 (programmed cell death-1). In 2006 clinical trials began to test the antibodies on patients with melanoma, kidney, lung, colon and prostate cancer. Six companies have developed antibodies against PD-1.

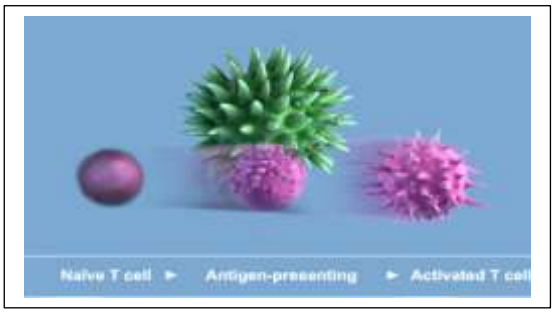
We were split into five working groups where we were tasked with gathering information from conference sessions to present on the final evening at a celebration dinner. The groups' topics this year were: Big data, Cancer biomarkers, Genome sequencing, Cancer complexity and Immunotherapy. My group worked on immunotherapy, and we elected to attend two or possibly three lectures each, following which we were to pool the information to make a presentation at the advocates' celebration dinner on the final evening.



The advocates were thrilled to be able to show their own posters in the poster sessions in the Exhibition Hall. A wonderful opportunity for showcasing advocacy work alongside the scientists own, and for the advocates, mentors and all of the programme team to view all and from that become more informed about our fellow advocates background.

The really big news coming out of this conference was the exciting results in immunotherapy and the fact that in some cases some patients have had complete responses to this form of therapy which involves equipping a patient's own T cells with an antibody like receptor that can target and destroy the cancer.





The goal is to increase the number of cancers that respond to immunotherapy. The challenge is to work out how to strengthen the power of the immune response to turn those not previously responded into those that do.

Special thanks to Dr Anna Barker, who along with Administrator Karen Russell Mills kept us focussed !

Finally, advocates and all those working on the Scientist↔Survivor programme found the experience to be most rewarding. I personally would like to thank all those working on the programme from year to year who strive to make it the success it is, and by doing so help to foster excellent relationships in their communities across the USA and beyond. Well Done !

http://blog.aacr.org/aacr-scientist-survivor-program-facilitates-open-dialogue-between-patient-advocates-and-scientists/