The Year Ahead – A Preview to The European Cancer Conference

a report by

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The European Cancer Conference (ECCO) has become established as ‘the’ European cancer event, and the need for such a large and highly scientific conference in Europe is greater than ever. The strength of translational research and the number of clinical trials being carried out by European researchers is growing, and with the recent expansion of the EU, the output, in terms of quality research and clinical trials, is sure to increase considerably over the next few years. Some of the most significant advances being made in oncology stem from translational research, and Europe is very fortunate to have an extremely strong and active translational research sector in oncology. The two main priorities established by the author upon becoming Federation of European Cancer Societies (FECS) President were to increase the scientific level of the clinical papers at the ECCO conference and especially to increase the amount of translational research presentations there. The author is optimistic that these aims have been successfully achieved.

This year’s conference, ECCO 13, will be held in Paris, from 30 October to 3 November and has received the highest number of abstracts of any ECCO to date. The quality and topicality of the data submitted is exceptional, with the translational data, in particular, being of the highest quality. For ECCO 13 the involvement of a great number of delegates who are world authorities in their respective areas has been secured. This article will draw particular attention to four of the invited speakers and award winners who have made significant and lasting contributions to the world of oncology.

Professor Harold Varmus, from the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, New York, is winner of the 1989 Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine. He will give a critical overview of the crucial role of molecular techniques in shaping the future of cancer treatment in his ECCO 13 keynote lecture ‘Molecular Oncology Comes of Age’. As former Director of the National Institute of Health in the US, Professor Varmus’s influence on cancer research, and science policy in general, has been felt around the world and he continues to play an active and significant role in the field of oncology. His research work in elucidating the cellular origins of the oncogene of the chicken retrovirus sparked the explosion of interest in the molecular origins of cancer and led to the isolation of many genes that are frequently mutated in human cancer.

For cancer treatment to be effective, Professor Varmus sees the need for molecular cancer research and clinical practice to become far more closely linked, which would enable the use of the molecular genetics of cancer to inform and guide all aspects of cancer care. An essential component of this vision of the future of cancer care is the identification of additional oncogene mutations, through genetic mapping, which would open the door to the development of new treatments and the identification of new potential drug targets. This future vision will be realised through exciting initiatives like the proposed Human Cancer Genome Project, which aims, over the next 10 years, to characterise the phenotypes and genotypes of the most common forms of cancer. Professor Varmus has been key in the development and promotion of such essential innovations.

Sir Richard Peto, Professor of Medical Statistics and Epidemiology at Oxford University, has accepted the FECS Clinical Research Award, which he will be presented with during ECCO 13. He is perhaps best known for his studies on the causes of lung cancer, in which he proved (together with Sir Richard Doll) that half of all persistent smokers will eventually be killed by tobacco. This understanding of the health implications of tobacco smoking initiated the wave of public health legislation that has been seen across Europe, and is directly responsible for the declining incidence of lung cancer in some countries. In the 1970s, Sir Richard also pioneered the use of the log-rank test for meta-analyses of results from many different randomised trials, and is especially noted for his research on the treatment of early breast cancer using this technique. It was for this work that he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II for his services to cancer epidemiology. Over the last 20 years he has gathered definitive evidence to show...
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that adjuvant chemoendocrine therapy for early breast cancer affects survival. This work was updated recently with the publication of the 15-year follow-up of the Early Breast Cancer Trialists’ Collaborative Group (EBCTCG) study, which showed that differences in 15-year survival are more than twice as great as those for five-year survival. The conclusion of this EBCTCG study is that earlier diagnosis and treatment will mean that mortality rates for breast cancer in middle-aged women will be half as high in the year 2010 as they were in 1990. As part of his FECS Clinical Research Award lecture Sir Richard will present new data from the follow-up of the Early Breast Cancer Trialists Group.

Professor Jose Baselga, Chief of Medical Oncology Service and Professor of Medicine, Vall d’Hebron University, Barcelona, is world-renowned for his expertise in clinical studies of breast cancer and for his translational research and early clinical trials of growth factor receptors and downstream molecules as targets for cancer therapy. In addition to his key role as Chairman of the ECCO 13 scientific committee’s translational programme, Professor Baselga will chair the session “Targeting Cancers’ Kinase Addiction” during which he will also present a key paper on epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR). In further recognition of his contribution to oncology, and to medical oncology in particular, he will also be presented with the European Society of Medical Oncology (ESMO) Society Award during the ESMO special session at ECCO 13.

With ECCO 13’s focus on translational research, one of the key elements in bringing cutting-edge technology to the service of the patient, it is appropriate to highlight at least two hot topics in this area. Examples of the potential for translational research bringing concrete benefits to patients are the current projects validating the use of microarrays to predict prognosis in breast cancer patients and using modern molecular biology tools (such as small interfering RNA (siRNA)) for screening and selecting new drugs for cancer therapy.

Professor René Bernards and his team at the Netherlands Cancer Institute, Amsterdam, focus on the application of innovative functional genomics tools to identify novel genes that have a role in carcinogenesis and to identify targets for the design and selection of new cancer therapeutic agents. His group also first demonstrated that breast cancer patients with poor prognosis had a distinctive ‘poor prognosis’ genetic signature. This work is now being developed and validated with the long-term objective of introducing routine testing of breast cancer patients to identify those who will benefit most from adjuvant therapy and allow better decisions to be made in the treatment of all women with breast cancer.

Recently, Professor Bernards has been confirmed as one of this year’s winners of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO)/Spinoza prize. This Dutch award in science comes with €1.5 million for the winner to freely devote to their research. The prize is given for outstanding, pioneering and inspiring scientific work. In recognition of his significant contribution to the field of translational research, and his leading role in the development of practical tools for use in the clinic, Professor Bernards will also receive the prestigious Pezcoller Foundation – FECS Recognition for Contribution to Oncology Award – at ECCO 13. This award is conferred at the occasion of every ECCO, through the generous contribution of the Pezcoller Foundation.

European oncology has never been in a stronger position than it is currently, and action should be taken to ensure that this position only becomes further reinforced and secure, for the benefit of all European cancer patients. By providing a forum for the presentation of world class research results the ECCO conference will continue to play a central role in the development and evolution of European cancer research treatment and care.