

The 20th IMS Annual Meeting at Athens 2023 – Ed Watson’s report

I am a Haematology trainee in the Thames Valley, currently studying for a DPhil in Cancer Sciences at the University of Oxford. I am supervised by Prof Udo Oppermann, and my core project is using single cell approaches to interrogate the response of myeloma to belantamab mafodotin (belamaf). Alongside this, I am also coordinating a study of the “real-world” responses to belamaf from the named patient programme in the UK and Ireland – a multi-centre effort that has received incredible support from many contributors. This latter study was accepted as an abstract for the IMS meeting in Athens, and I was delighted to receive a generous UK Myeloma Society / Janssen bursary to support my attendance.

This was my first IMS Annual Meeting. As an aspiring Clinician-Scientist, I thought the programme had a good balance of clinical insights alongside more translational science. The enthusiasm in me needn’t have worried as there were very few parallel events, making it possible to attend most of the talks – the only exception being the late afternoon abstract sessions. A “Who’s Who” of the myeloma world spoke on a variety of key topics: the origin of myeloma (still elusive, it seems!); first-line management; understanding and dealing with the relapsed state; managing complications of immunotherapy; as well as the treatment options available to the frail population. It was interesting to me that the faculty spoke broadly with one voice, suggesting that there is international consensus on the current myeloma treatment algorithm and on the priorities for the future. Despite the harmony it was nonetheless clear that access to therapies – and especially CAR T – is heterogeneous, and publicly at least, there was no clear plan to address this.

For me, the best science was showcased in the abstracts. The “Novel Technologies and Insights” symposium provided a variety of content to ponder: multi-single cell -omics and how these can inform CAR T response; using copy number variations to plot clonal phylogenies; and manipulating gut microbiota in mouse models to impact immunotherapy. I found the “Relapsed / Refractory” symposium the most engaging – where we heard about subclone-specific TME interactions, as well as a fascinating story of a single patient’s disease carrying a genomic memory of all the treatments to which it had been exposed.

It wasn’t all sitting in lecture theatres. I enjoyed discussing our poster with those who happened across it, as well as engaging with other Haematology trainees, PhD students and established Clinicians and Scientists. It has been a true joy of my DPhil to get to know my lab colleagues, and I thoroughly appreciated their company as we explored Athens and tucked into the local food. A definite highlight was the cultural evening organised by the IMS, with its splendid buffet, music and dance; I think images of the Great and Good of the myeloma world on a disco floor will remain with me for some time (for better or worse).

I am very grateful indeed to the UKMS and Janssen for the bursary, and as I progress through my career, I hope to build on what I have learnt from the conference, and the relationships I have begun.