

Centre of Excellence in Autoimmunity in Cancer (CEAC): SANDPIT EVENT

On the 9 January 2012 CEAC hosted its first sandpit event in the School of Pharmacy at The University of Nottingham. The aim was to facilitate discussion amongst multidisciplinary participants who have an interest in pursuing research that will contribute to the fight against cancer. It is recognised that the challenges posed in beating cancer requires interdisciplinary teams who have strong foundations in their basic disciplines looking at opportunities of working together to progress anti-cancer research. The meeting attracted 40 participants, some being active researchers from a range of medical, biomedical, physical and social science disciplines, as well as potential users of research outcomes ie clinicians including surgeons, oncologists and radiotherapists who manage patients with cancer.

Professor Robertson gave an initial overview of the extensive challenges faced and the mission and strategy of CEAC directed towards cancer early detection using autoantibody (AABs) and the potential of innovative treatment of cancers using a personalised/stratified medicine approach. He also outlined some of the basic science challenges around carcinogenesis and cancer cell biology which could be pursued via CEAC research portfolio. Following his overview there was a vigorous question and answer session which highlighted some lateral thinking and suggestions for new approaches to address particular research challenges in the field of cancer research with the emphasis on early diagnosis and treatment.

The Q&A was followed by two breakout sessions aimed at exploring in greater depth ideas and opportunities to advance the research agenda. One grouping focused on the laboratory science and technologies around the CEAC research agenda. Topics covered included: Proteins – expression, production, purification, Cancer stem cells, Tumour antigens/Assay format developments/Cloning of AAb producing cells, tumour microenvironment. The other grouping covered: Clinical/Public Health/Primary Care/Health Economic/Therapeutic interventions/Statistics & mathematical modelling.

In a final session the main points arising from the breakouts were summarised and discussed with all participants; together with a ‘what next?’ discussion. Prof Robertson concluded by flagging a funding/pump priming opportunity for research projects that may follow from the sandpit interactions. (Funding kindly underwritten by the Dean of FMHS and by the PVCs for Research and FMHS)

What was the impression of the sandpit and what next?

At worst some might worry that a term such as “sandpit” could create visions of infantilising researchers. However experience has shown in this institution and others that such events have produced excellent results by way of new ideas, research interactions and impacting outcomes. The ideas that flowed from this CEAC sandpit give optimism for the same.

It was the general view of participants that they found the sandpit event very stimulating, informative and it signalled clear opportunities for useful and high quality collaborations including

grant applications and potentially impacting studies. However to consolidate and build on the exciting sandpit interactions Professors Robertson and Sewell arranged some follow up meetings to further the interdisciplinary opportunities that were flagged. For two working days they met one-to-one or with small groups of researchers to pursue and develop some of the ideas that were put forward.

It is expected that some of the emergent studies will contribute to bringing into reality the vision and the mission of CEAC to ultimately save and improve the quality of lives of patients with various cancers.