UNIVERSITY of CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO
MEDICAL CENTER MOORES CANCER CENTER

Moores UCSD Cancer Center Symposium Aimed at Building Connections

Dennis Carson, M.D., thinks that industry-academia collaborations are critical for the field of oncology to move forward. It's one reason why Carson, director of the Moores Cancer Center at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), has made fostering these relationships part of a growing emphasis at the Cancer Center on translational oncology, bringing cancer research findings from the laboratory to the clinic.

So it is little surprise that the heart of translational oncology was on display recently at the 4th annual Moores UCSD Cancer Center Translational Oncology Symposium, held at the Cancer Center's La Jolla campus. Symposium organizer Ida Deichaite, Ph.D., Cancer Center director of industry relations, brought together leaders from industry and academia to discuss some of the most advanced work in such fields as stem cells and cancer, biomarkers for early disease detection and drug resistance. At the same time, the meeting provided a forum for clinicians and scientists to find new ways to interact and collaborate, perhaps opening doors to new discoveries and developments in the war against cancer.

Many of those who attended applauded the concept behind the meeting. "I thought that it was an extremely valuable and unique symposium that reflects the importance of industry-academia partnerships in expediting translation of discoveries from the lab to the clinic," says Catriona Jamieson, M.D., Ph.D., director for Stem Cell Research at the Moores UCSD Cancer Center.

Neela Patel, Ph.D., director of preclinical and translational medicine at Poinard Pharmaceuticals in South San Francisco, believes such meetings are crucial for both groups.

“Face-to-face meetings between academic clinicians, researchers and industry generate lots of ideas,” she says. “Sitting at the table with clinicians provides insights into clinical problems that we in industry may not have otherwise. It can be difficult for a small company such as Poniard to replicate that depth of knowledge in house. On the other hand, we bring drug discovery knowledge to that table and can help advance early stage compounds into the clinic.”

The meeting had plenty of science and policy discussions to offer as well. Stanford University’s Irving Weissman, M.D., for example, discussed some of the science behind stem cells and their potential roles in cancer development. Alan Trounson, Ph.D., president of the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine, outlined how CIRM, a major science funding source in the state, wanted to “build bridges” and support translational stem cell research in cancer.

Others, such as Diane Simeone, M.D., of the University of Michigan, discussed the potential role of stem cells in pancreatic cancer, particularly their implications for therapy and in disease recurrence. Dong-Er Zhang, Ph.D., of the Moores UCSD Cancer Center described her team’s use of a mouse model that it developed to study acute myelogenous leukemia. In a panel discussion at the end of the day led by moderator Ivor Royston, M.D., of Forward Ventures, Jamieson, Biocom president and CEO Joseph Panetta, Pfizer vice president of global R&D Catherine Mackey and Poniard CEO Jerry McMahon, Ph.D., and others addressed topics ranging from the lack of funding support to “cure cancer” to ideas for new start-up and incubator models for developing companies to finding better ways for academia and industry to work together.

Carson sees such meetings as potentially achieving much more than simply getting academic scientists and experts at pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies in the

same room, talking about mutual interests. Developing relationships early on in drug development can lead to new, innovative clinical trials. They are also a conduit to begin breaking down traditional academia-industry barriers. In the end, he says, “Fostering and strengthening the ties between scientists in the laboratory and experts in biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies to develop new, potentially valuable drugs against cancer is vital for the benefit of patients.”

Cancer vascular biology researcher David Cheresh, Ph.D., agrees. “We’re at the front end of discovery, while industry is focused on development,” says Cheresh, associate director for translational research and vice chair of pathology at the Moores UCSD Cancer Center. “There’s real value when we interact and exchange ideas with the private sector.”

He may not have long to wait for his next opportunity. Deichaite is already busy planning another translational oncology meeting for February.