

Dr Abigail Zabron's report to AMMF on her visit to the US Mayo Clinic Autumn 2012

As a research fellow, sponsored by AMMF, and working with Dr Shahid Khan and Professor Simon Taylor-Robinson at Imperial College London, my work is focused on developing better tests for cholangiocarcinoma, to improve patient management.

Learning from other research and clinical groups, and working in conjunction with them, is vital in ensuring the best possible outcomes for this project, and for our patients. I was therefore delighted to be awarded the Dame Shelia Sherlock travelling fellowship in Hepatology 2012, awarded in memory of Dame Sheila Sherlock, a pioneering female hepatologist whose work underlies much of current liver medicine. The fellowship enabled me to spend a month at the Mayo Clinic, Minnesota, USA.

Holding true to its founding principles of combining clinical management, research and medical training in one institution for the betterment of their patients, the Mayo Clinic is an international centre of excellence in clinical management and research in cholangiocarcinoma. My hosts, Professor Greg Gores and his colleague Dr Lewis Roberts, are both clinician-scientists with multiple cutting-edge projects in both the basic biology and clinical management of the disease, and the Hepatology department runs one of the few successful programmes of liver transplantation for a carefully selected subgroup of patients with early cholangiocarcinoma. I was absolutely thrilled to be able to spend some time there.

In particular, this fellowship afforded me a vital opportunity to develop a research collaboration between the Mayo Clinic and Imperial College in biomarker research in cholangiocarcinoma, building on some of my recent translational work. In terms of developing an effective protocol together with the research and clinical staff, being "on the ground" was invaluable in getting our study up and running. It was also fascinating to observe some of the basic science research carried out in Professor Gores and Dr Roberts' labs, and to think about where our two centres' work may complement each other's. Certainly this has provided me with many ideas for developing cholangiocarcinoma research in the future.

When not in the lab, I was made welcome as a clinical observer on the wards and in clinics. It was a privilege to attend clinic and ward rounds with the senior doctors, and to meet several patients undergoing treatment for cholangiocarcinoma, as well as their families. Following their progress over several weeks gave me a good appreciation of the pros and cons of various different treatments, both in terms of medical efficacy, and in the challenges these treatments set for the patients themselves.

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I was also able to attend multiple ERCP and EUS sessions, and to better appreciate the potential of these techniques in treatment of cholangiocarcinoma. Imperial College London and the Mayo Clinic already has a collaboration in developing radiofrequency ablation to treat bile duct disease, and I was able to witness this first hand.

My visit provided me with invaluable experience to bring back to the UK and will inform my clinical practice both now as a trainee, and as I develop into an independent Hepatology practitioner.

More than anything, spending time with other doctors determined to beat this insidious disease has only strengthened my resolve to do just that, and my belief that this is achievable.

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