

Newcastle meeting report.

54 members and 18 accompanying partners attended the meeting in Newcastle on Tyne, hosted by John Hawkesford, on the 16th and 17th November 2006, based at The Thistle Hotel in central Newcastle.

Most members arrived on Thursday afternoon in time for tea in the library prior to the annual general meeting. That evening, members and partners attended an informal dinner in an elegant room in the hotel.

On Friday morning, 17th November, after breakfast a coach transported members to the Tomlinson Teaching Centre at the Newcastle General Hospital for the Scientific Meeting.

The meeting was introduced by Tom Keating who gave an informative lecture on the history and economy of the North East of England - Northumberland, Tyne and Wear and the Tees Valley. Tom finished by giving a history of the Newcastle General Hospital and advised that the Teaching Centre was the former dining room of the original workhouse.

After the introduction, John introduced a series of his colleagues who were mostly personal friends who demonstrated Newcastle to be at the forefront of medical research and clinical excellence. The first was Peter Donaldson of the Institute of Human Genetics at Newcastle University. He started with his lecture entitled "Genetics of Common Diseases - How current research is fulfilling the promise of the human genome project." He advised that it is likely that there is a genetic component to almost all disease, apart from trauma, and he told us about his own liver disease research into primary biliary cirrhosis and hepatitis C virus infection.

Next Mr. Sajjad Ahmad gave a lecture entitled "The Cheeky Eye" in which he described limbal stem cell deficiency (most commonly by chemical burns), which is both blinding and painful during blinking. He described how amniotic membrane, grown from stem cells over a two week period, can be transplanted onto the cornea, giving a slight improvement in sight but a major improvement in comfort of the eye.

After coffee and a varied and interesting trade exhibition, Professor Andrew Cant talked about stem cell therapies for disorders of immunity in children. He started by updating us on some basic immunology and then demonstrated results of treatment of patients with chronic granulomatous disease. Previously with the best supportive treatment they achieved a life expectancy at best until their third decade, but could now expect a normal life expectancy in good health, albeit with decreased fertility by transplantation of stem cells from a matched sibling or even from an unmatched donor with over 80% survival.

Dr. Ed Ong talked about Aids in a lecture entitled "HIV at 25 Years: The story so far". He retraced the history of HIV infection back to the first time it was noticed in homosexual men in the United States of America and in heterosexuals in Haiti in 1976; he speculated as to the aetiology. He described the

biological basis of anti viral treatment, which has led to a declining death rate from HIV in the United States and Europe with the result that life expectancy is now only two or three years less than normal but with complications of drug treatment.

Following lunch, Professor Michael Griffin demonstrated how centralisation of a specialist service for oesophageal cancer had improved life expectancy and decreased the mortality of oesophagectomy for cancer in his lecture "Radical oesophagectomy for cancer - practice and progress." He started by describing the increase in prevalence of adenocarcinoma of the oesophagus which has been increasing exponentially as a result of obesity, meat eating and gastric reflux. Oesophagectomy has the highest mortality rate of any cancer surgery but by centralising a service with three specialist surgeons carrying out over a hundred operations a year had managed to improve lymph node dissection, decreased anastomosis breakdown, decreased blood loss and producing a 30% five year survival, whereas previously there had been a 30% one year survival rate. Professor Griffin's lecture was illustrated by superb videos of the surgery being carried out.

This was followed by Professor Jim Edwards, the Director of the Institute for Ageing and Health at the University of Newcastle. In his talk, entitled "The Business of Ageing from Molecule to Market", he demonstrated graphically the increase in life expectancy which continues at the rate of two years per decade and showed no signs of decreasing. He described ageing as the response of the body to damage and that less than 25% of longevity was the result of genetics; ageing is intrinsically malleable and that intervention can extend life. He then described the research into ageing that is being carried out in Newcastle, and talked about his own research interest into Alzheimer's disease.

Finally, Professor Mark Birch-Machin talked about his interest in sun damage to the skin in a lecture entitled "A Tan to Die For". He described the effects of damage on DNA by UVA and UVB light at the molecular level and described the effects of over exposure to the sun on the skin. He described his work in reducing risk by research and campaigns to increase awareness of risks.

Following the scientific meeting, Professor Thomas Kreuzsch gave a short presentation introducing Hamburg and his Department, where he would be hosting John's overseas meeting from 2nd May to 5th May in 2007. Thomas hoped we would attend and that this would lead to further exchange visits.

During the scientific meeting the ladies enjoyed a comprehensive tour of Newcastle and the Northumberland countryside and coast led by Tom Keating, visiting Alnwick Castle Gardens and having lunch in the Tree House before returning to Newcastle.

Following the meeting, members returned to the hotel by coach and in the evening were transported to the Jesmond Dean House Hotel for an excellent formal dinner in the grand dining room. The ladies accompanied Barbara and Julia Hawkesford to Amers Restaurant in Jesmond for an excellent meal.

On Saturday a group of 23 members and partners had a tour around Newcastle guided by Tom Keating, who pointed out the history, economics and geography of the city. We then proceeded to John's home in Stocksfield, where we were treated to an excellent buffet lunch, returning afterwards to the hotel.