

MEETING REPORT

'THEY ARE RARE, BUT THEY ARE THERE'. REPORT FROM THE GYNOCARE TRAINING SCHOOL IN SOFIA, BULGARIA (29TH JUNE-1ST JULY 2023)

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The European Network for Gynaecological Rare Cancer Research: from Concept to Cure (GYNOCARE COST Action CA18117), organized a three-day hybrid training school entitled: 'They are rare, but they are there'. This training school was held at the historic Rectorate at the University of Sofia in Sofia, Bulgaria. The aim of this training school was to highlight the different aspects of how the management of rare gynecological cancers (RGCs) can be improved through the interdisciplinarity present within the GYNOCARE consortium and collaborators. There were 35 invited talks by high-profile international speakers organized over 6 workshops.

The training school kicked off with the first workshop on the role of the multidisciplinary team in the

treatment of rare gynecological cancers (RGCs). Prof. **Angel Yordanov** from the Medical University Plevan, Bulgaria outlined the need for guidelines in the management of RGCs, and this was followed by a presentation of a case series of RGCs by Dr. **Dimitar Metodiev** from the Neuropathological Laboratory, University Hospital 'Saint Ivan Rilski', Sofia, Bulgaria. Prof. **Aljoša Mandić** from the Oncology Institute of Vojvodina, University of Novi Sad, Serbia focused on low grade serous ovarian cancer, which is a rare disease with so many treatment roads to follow. The importance of radiology, particularly pattern recognition in nuclear imaging in RGCs, and the role of radiotherapy in cervical cancer were discussed by Dr. **Pavel Bochev** and by Dr. **Nikolay Nedev** from Acibadem Cityclink Oncology Center, Sofia Bulgaria, re-

spectively. The current and future molecular testing and therapy in ovarian cancer was highlighted by Dr. **Paul Kubelak** from the Oncology Institute 'Prof. Dr. Ion Chiricuță', Cluj-Napoca, Romania, and this was followed by an outline of the genetics of RGCs by Dr. **Iva Dimova** from the Medical University of Sofia, Bulgaria. Dr. **Georgi Stamenov** from the Nadezhda Women's Health Hospital in Sofia, Bulgaria, and Dr. **Maria Yunakova** from 'Dr. Shterev' Hospital, Sofia, Bulgaria each focused on reproductive health and the importance of fertility sparing surgery in women with RGCs.

The second workshop was dedicated to sentinel lymph node biopsy in gynecology. Prof. **Emiel Rutgers**, surgical oncologist from the Netherlands Cancer Institute, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, highlighted the past, present, and future role of sentinel lymph node biopsy in breast cancer. This was followed by a lecture on the role of indocyanine green (ICG) in sentinel node dissection of the breast, by Dr. **Tsvetomir Ivanov** from the Medical University of Sofia and its safety and feasibility was outlined by Prof. **Dessislava Kostova-Lefterova** medical physicist, at National Cardiology Hospital, Sofia, Bulgaria. However, in low resource countries, it can be challenging to implement sentinel node biopsy, and this was discussed by Prof. **Aleksandar Celebic** from the Clinical Center of Montenegro, Podgorica, Montenegro. At the end of the first day of the training school, there was an interactive hands-on workshop on ultrasound guided core needle biopsy in breast lesions, led by Dr. **Mariela Vasileva-Slaveva** and Dr. **Alexander Stoichev** from the Bulgarian Breast and Gynaecological Cancer Association, Sofia, Bulgaria.

The second day of the training school started off with a workshop on HPV screening for cervical cancer prevention. Dr. **Márcia Vieira-Coimbra** from the Centro Hospitalar Tondela-Viseu, Portugal gave an overview on the cervical cancer screening programmes in Europe following a survey organized by the European Board and College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology (EBCOG), and then Dr. **Yulia Panayotova** from the Ministry of Health in Bulgaria focused on cervical screening programs in Bulgaria.

Next followed a workshop on basic approaches in human papilloma virus (HPV) testing as part of cervical cancer screening. Dr. **Vesela Ivanova** from the Medical University of Bulgaria described the underlying pathophysiology, followed by an explanation of the mechanisms of telomerase activation and causal

models of cancer by **Francesca Wright**, from the University of Essex, UK. The biotech company, QIAGEN, was represented by Dr. **Eric Jan Cools**, who explained the latest advances in molecular cervical screening. This workshop concluded with a practical workshop on HPV testing led by Dr. **Kalina Belemezova** from the Medical University of Sofia, Bulgaria.

One of the main missions of GYNOCARE is the coordination and contribution to the development of a research roadmap dedicated to connect innovative basic research to harmonized biobanking to 'smarter' clinical trials. In view of this, the afternoon of the second day of the training school was dedicated to a workshop on career development in oncology. The interpretation of the results of clinical trials, especially those involving RGCs was explained by Prof. **Neville Calleja** from the Department of Health Information and Research within the Ministry for Health in Malta. The research ethics in clinical trials and publishing was outlined by Prof. **Svetoslav Stoev** from the Medical University of Pleven, Bulgaria. Dr. **Bridget Ellul**, from the Research Ethics Task Force, ELSI Services at Research within the BBMRI-ERIC and representative of the BBMRI-Malta node, presented the results of an international survey on informed consent for biobanking of samples derived from RGCs across Europe.

The importance for surgeons in low- and middle-income countries to engage in research, as well as the development of a surgical research curriculum in low resource settings like the Philippines was emphasized by Dr. **Carmela Caballero**, Breast Surgeon and Medical Advisor for Breast Cancer Research at Breast International Group, Brussels, Belgium. The Chief Editor of the European Journal of Surgical Oncology, Prof. **Riccardo Audisio** from the University of Gotenburg, Sweden delivered a very informative lecture on how to write an article and be accepted. He also highlighted his career journey which led to his positions as past-president of the International Society of Geriatric Oncology (SIOG), British Association of Surgical Oncology (BASO) and European Society of Surgical Oncology (ESSO). This was followed by a presentation on the 'European School of Oncology' and its legacy in education and tackling disparities by Prof. **Alexandru Eniu**, medical oncologist and Chief Physician at the Hôpital Riviera-Chablais in Rennaz, Switzerland. Finally, the attendees enjoyed a session on basic techniques for keeping the work-life balance by Dr. **Veneta Terziiska** from Sofia, Bulgaria.

On the third day of the training school, there was a workshop on patient advocacy, with the patients and patient representatives from Bulgarian, and in fact, professional translation to and from Bulgarian was provided. This workshop was moderated by Dr. **Mariela Vasileva-Slaveva** from the Bulgarian Breast and other gynecological Cancers Association, Sofia, Bulgaria, and Medical University Pleven, Pleven, Bulgaria. As examples from practice and strategic planning in patient advocacy, Dr. **Sharon O'Toole** from Trinity St James's Cancer Institute and Trinity College Dublin, Ireland presented the Irish experience in successfully building patient partnerships. The work of the Bulgarian Lymphoedema society was outlined by Dr. **Petia Stoycheva**. Dr. **Yulia Panayotova** followed up by describing the involvement of patient groups in Bulgaria involving women who inspire other women to address inequalities in cervical cancer screening in Bulgaria. As part of the BIG Patient Partnership Initiative, Dr. **Carmela Caballero**, Medical Advisor for Breast Cancer Research at Breast International Group (BIG), Brussels, Belgium shared the experiences of BIG of embarking on a journey with patient advocates, involving them in the early development of clinical trials. This workshop was concluded by a session on the importance of patient-doctor communication by Dr. **Margarita Tarein**, clinical psychologist at the Acibadem City Clinic in Sofia, Bulgaria.

The final workshop of the training school was dedicated to robotic surgery. Prof. **Angel Yordanov** from the Medical University Pleven, Pleven, Bulgaria moderated the workshop and, together with Dr. **Ihsan Hasan**, outlined the basics of robotic surgery. The role of laparoscopic versus robotic surgery in gynecology was discussed by Prof. **Gligor Tofoski** from University Clinic of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Skopje, North Macedonia. The place of robotic surgery in gynecological oncology was highlighted by Dr. **Lachezar Tanchev** from the Medical University of Pleven, Bulgaria. Finally, the advances in robotic surgery were described by Prof. **Tim Horeman** Department of Biomechanical engineering, Delft University of Technology in Delft, The Netherlands. This workshop was wrapped up by a hands-on practice using a robot.

In conclusion, the GYNOCARE Training School in Sofia has been successful in reaching out to over 100 participants, enabling and enhancing capacity-building on RGCs by connecting high-quality scientific communities in various disciplines, existing networks, policy-makers, industrial partners, and patient organizations in Bul-

garia, across Europe and beyond. This training school has been an ideal platform for sharing best practices, including legal and ethical requirements, in RGCs, aiming to advice policy-makers and other key stakeholders. Above all, it provided equal networking opportunities for early-stage researchers, and other talented young professionals to spearhead them in the field of RGCs.

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