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Getting to the core of digestive research

Fitzsimmons, Leah

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Event Review

Getting to the core of digestive research

Exploring the Science of Digestion provided an opportunity for patients, families, and the general public to hear about some of the latest research being funded by Core (formerly the British Digestive Association). The event featured talks on topics ranging from iron deficiency anaemia to pancreatic cancer.

Ashley Dennison (University of Leicester, UK) began with a sobering review of the current disease burden of pancreatitis and pancreatic cancer, which is currently responsible for an annual US\$5 billion health-care cost burden in the USA. Although there is continued urgent need for advances in the treatment of pancreatic disease, it was heartening to hear that Core is supporting the development of two new medicines for pancreatitis.

Many people will have complained of heartburn at some point over the festive season, but for most this will be easily resolved with an antacid. However, those who experience heartburn regularly may be surprised to learn that damage caused by acid reflux can increase oesophageal carcinoma risk. John deCaestecker (University Hospitals of Leicester, UK) gave an overview of a range of current trials to identify, track, and treat patients with the precancerous condition Barrett's oesophagus, of which heartburn can be an early indicator. Of particular interest was the BRIDE feasibility trial, which measured outcomes for patients with Barrett's oesophagus who develop dysplasia or early cancer. BRIDE compared the use of endoscopic resection combined with either radiofrequency ablation (RFA) or argon plasma coagulation (APC) with standard surgery alone. Since both endoscopic treatments appear to effectively control disease progression at 1 year follow-up, yet NICE-approved RFA is six times more costly than APC, a full-scale, follow-up trial (BRIDE2) is now planned.

Early detection was also the key theme of the talk by Mike MacFarlane (University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust, UK) about his work in developing electronic noses (e-noses) for the diagnosis of colorectal carcinoma. The e-noses detect volatile organic compounds (VOC) in the test matter (in this case urine or stool), giving rise to a unique VOC profile. The WOLF e-nose used by MacFarlane is now part of a wider study to determine whether the VOC profiles of patients with colorectal cancer show any unique features compared with controls. Importantly, the study will also include post-treatment samples as well as those from first-degree relatives and spouses to distinguish environmental and genetic factors affecting VOCs and confirm specificity. This work aims to develop a non-invasive method of early colorectal cancer diagnosis, although it is hoped that VOC profiling might also shed light on the relationship between the gut microbiome and disease.

Finally, Matthew Brookes (University of Wolverhampton, UK) talked about the underappreciated role of anaemia in gastrointestinal disease. He discussed a recent trial (IVICA) he has been involved with comparing the treatment of colon-cancer-associated anaemia with either intravenous or oral iron supplements. Although the overall volume of blood transfusions required by study participants was only moderately decreased in patients who received intravenous iron compared with those who received oral iron therapy, those who received intravenous iron reported better post-operative quality of life scores.

The talks were followed with interesting and often heartfelt discussion, chaired by Core trustee, Chris Hawkey (University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK). There was also a focus throughout the event on openness and honesty when discussing gastrointestinal disease, and an obvious commitment to bringing patients and clinicians together to set the agenda in digestive disease research. As the burden of digestive illness increases, it is vital that events that engage researchers with the public continue.

Leah Fitzsimmons

Exploring the Science of Digestion was held on Dec 6, 2016
at Birmingham Town Hall, Birmingham, UK

<http://corecharity.org.uk/2016/12/the-presentationsfrom-exploring-the-science-ofdigestion-birmingham/>

For more on **Core** see <http://corecharity.org.uk/>