Congress Interview

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RUUD Delwel, Chair of Scientific Program Committee, European Hematology Association (EHA) 2021 Virtual Congress, spoke with EMJ ahead of the congress about his role within the society, research interests and recent publications, and his thoughts on the challenges and innovations in haematology research.

Q1 With over 30 years studying and working in this field, why haematology? What drew you to this discipline and what motivates you to continue pursuing this career path?

When I finished my biology study, with a major focus on molecular and cellular biology, I had to decide what my next step would be. I remember reading a newspaper article about a doctor who was based at the Erasmus MC Cancer Institute, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, and performed bone marrow transplantation in patients with leukaemia. Since this was a procedure which fascinated me, I decided to make contact with the specialist in question. It transpired he was Professor Löwenberg, one of the founding members of EHA. I can still vividly recall that phone conversation. A day later, I had a job.

Although haematological malignancies do not represent the most common cancer group in the Western world, you can nonetheless study them very well. Leukaemia cells can be readily isolated with a needle in a vein and subsequently purified, cultured, frozen, and thawed. You can then perform a variety of different studies, including protein and DNA analysis. Each time, there are new research questions to address and technologies to apply. This is what I really love. While studying leukaemia cells and solving problems in leukaemia, one also gathers knowledge about other malignancies.

Q2 As the Program Director of the EHA 2021, what are the primary goals the EHA board is working towards in this year's congress? What strategies has the committee put in place to ensure these goals are achieved?

The EHA congress is a big meeting. At the annual in-person congresses, we would often have between 10,000 and 15,000 healthcare professionals and scientists in attendance. However, the virtual conferences are capable of attracting an even larger audience. Last year, over 25,000 people registered. Importantly, all these individuals are from different fields.

As such, EHA creates a platform for clinical, translational, and laboratory-based scientists to share their latest research, treatment strategies, and diagnostic tools. There is also an emphasis on breakthroughs in basic science.

Although I am based in the laboratory, I always make the effort to learn from my physician colleagues. In turn, I hope that my physician colleagues do the same, and attend the talks given by experimental scientists. Only when the haematology community comes together in this way can we begin to make the crucial breakthroughs and advances.

Q3 How much of an impact do you believe the EHA congress has, both directly on haematologists and indirectly on patients? Additionally, what sessions are you looking forward to in this year's congress and why?

As I previously mentioned, the EHA congress is where clinicians and academics come to present the most recent data from across the discipline. There is even a late-breaking session, where last-minute data can be submitted. As a consequence, there are treatments available nowadays that were unheard of 4 or 5 years ago.

To be honest, there are not just one or two specific talks but rather a number of them that I am looking forward to. The EHA in-focus sessions, which this year will cover topics such as immunotherapy and CRISPR-Cas9 technology for genome editing, are always of particular interest to me. The same is true of the COVID-19 talks, which will be presented by internationally renowned experts in the field.

Q4 As an active member of several scientific committees in haematology, such as EHA and American Society of Hematology (ASH), have you found similarities or differences in working in haematology between the European and American societies?

Overall, I would say that the EHA is slightly more clinically oriented than the ASH. However, they are both fantastic organisations that organise their own meetings separately but also work closely with one another on certain topics. I have visited both meetings many times and given presentations at both EHA and ASH, and the same is true for many of my peers.

In addition, these two societies offer a joint training programme for young scientists, which has been in place for 15 years. It is also worth mentioning that the EHA always dedicates 1 hour to specifically focus on its connection with ASH and other haematology organisations, including the Japanese Society of Hematology (JSH) and the International Society for Experimental Hematology (ISEH).

Q5 What do you believe are currently the biggest challenges facing the haematological research community? Are there any innovations on the horizon in the field of haematology that you think are particularly noteworthy?

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges is the impact of COVID-19 infections on coagulation; however, this is not my field of research.

Immunotherapy is an evolving and promising form of cancer treatment, which is being used more and more in the haematological malignancies. Improvements in molecular biological techniques also deserve a mention since these allow investigators to generate cellular therapies. In fact, a very nice example was presented at this year's EHA. Young patients who were born with so-called Hurler's disease were treated using gene therapy, in which a genetic defect was restored in the cells of those patients. Of course, the long-term effects of those treatments need investigating; however, this is one of those examples which makes our work so exciting.

Q6 As an educator, what advice would you give to students interested in pursuing a career in haematology?

Individuals who have a clinical background should always try to understand the role played by laboratory-based scientists. Similarly, scientists that are active in our field should always be aware of the needs in the clinic. Although less specific to the field of haematology, I also think it is important to remember that, as an individual, you do not know everything yourself. There are always opportunities to learn from others: your tutors, collaborators, scientists from different disciplines, and your wider network. Importantly, others in your network should also learn from the knowledge and wisdom you have accrued. It is often the case that you can benefit from others just as much as they can benefit from you. This multidisciplinary approach has made our field of research even more interesting and attractive than it was 10 or 15 years ago. ■