



Congress Interviews

Three leading experts, including the 2024 European Hematology Association (EHA) President, discuss their career and latest advancements in the field of haematology. Read on to learn about the latest initiatives in EHA, as well as the newest innovations and challenges in the field.



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“The Mentorships Mixer is really a new initiative to bring more senior haematologists in contact with younger haematologists”

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Q1 In recent years, the European Hematology Association (EHA) has launched several exciting initiatives. For example, the YoungEHA Mentorship Mixer at EHA 2024 is designed to connect early-career haematologists with experienced mentors. What are the key goals you hope to achieve with this initiative, and how do you see it shaping the career of young haematologists?

I think the most important thing to say in respect to this is that EHA is a members' association, and as such, it's crucial that we cater to our members' needs. This initiative of having a mentorship programme really came from young haematologists who felt that there are big discrepancies and big inequalities in various countries in Europe, in terms of how mentorship is given. Especially for those who want to go into research, who want to have a career as a physician scientist, we felt it was particularly important to have a mentor, an international mentor that could advise them on how to take their careers, and how to take their research projects. The Mentorships Mixer is really a new initiative to bring more senior

haematologists in contact with younger haematologists, in hopes to be establishing more long-term relationships that will shape their careers. This will enable them to direct their research and career paths into whatever they want to do in the future. I know that the focus is very much on young EHA members, but it also has a big focus on more mature EHA members, getting them involved in the EHA as much as possible, and helping with the careers of future haematologists.

Q2 Secondly, the EHA-European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL)/European Bioinformatics Institute (EBI) Computational Biology Training program aims to equip researchers with essential computational skills. Can you elaborate on the importance of computational biology in modern haematology research, and how this collaboration will enhance research capabilities in the field?

I think one thing that we must recognise is that computational biologists are a rare breed, and they're particularly important. In research, we all think very much of laboratory research and clinical research collection, and

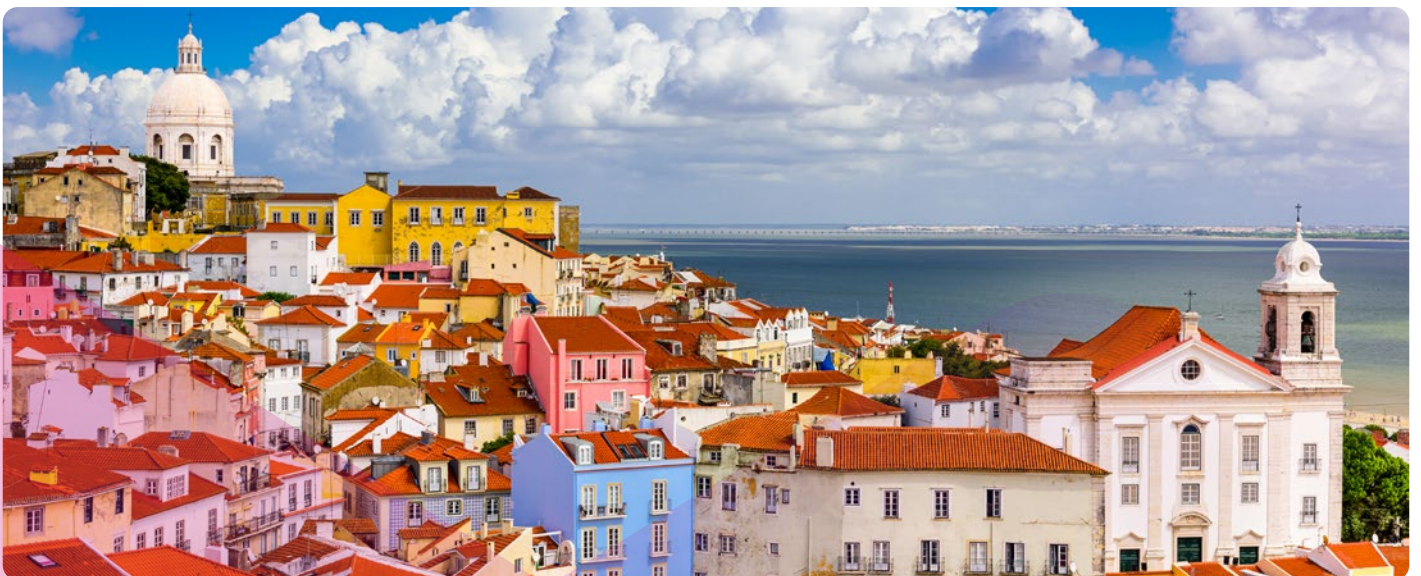
generation, of data. However, data analysis, *in silico* analysis, is so critical, and it has can have such a huge impact, especially nowadays with all the new tools that are powered by artificial intelligence and other algorithms. So I think it is essential that researchers do have competences in computational biology, and that they do acquire all these new knowledges that can be had. This partnership with the EMBL/EBI has been critical. They have the know-how, they know what there is to know in computational biology, and they have huge expertise to be able to teach this to researchers. This has been very important and very well received by the community. Once again, like the Mentorship Mixer initiative, this came very much out of the need from our researchers to know more about computational biology, and to gain proficiency in it, and I think this will also have a very big impact on what haematology research can do, and on the whole community. So I think it's a very good example of how, through partnerships with experts, we can really serve the community, and help everybody come up to speed with what they need.

Q3 Finally touching on the EHA-American Society of Hematology (ASH) Translational Research Training in Haematology (TRTH) programme bridges the gap between laboratory research and clinical application. Could you discuss the significance of this collaboration with ASH, and how the TRTH programme is expected to impact the translation of scientific discoveries into patient care improvements?

Once again, I think this is a great example of collaboration between experts societies. The ASH has had a very large programme, for a long time, in translational research. We joined forces with them, really, so that our trainees in translational research could have a vision of what research is like on both sides of the Atlantic. This has been very, very productive. The whole idea is that the participants in this programme come out with a research project, which then

can submit for funding from large funding agencies. This has been amazing in terms of the people who we've helped in their careers, in terms of how projects really have come up to scratch and produced great results, also in terms of how the EHA and ASH have come together with common goals; to promote clinician scientists, to promote researchers in haematology, and to really change careers and produce world class research. This is very much a mentorship programme. It does benefit from expertise from both sides of the Atlantic. So, I think it has produced a state-of-the-art community of scientists who are able to take things into the future, and hopefully will continue to do so. It's a very exciting programme that has really been the birthplace of many other mentorship programmes that we have.

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Q4 We have now passed the 4-year anniversary since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Reflecting back on this time, how do you feel the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the field of haematology?

It is undeniable that COVID-19 had a huge impact on patients. Most of our patients have some source or other of immune suppression, and so they suffered heavily from COVID-19. Even after the vaccines, many of our patients still have COVID-19; this was particularly tragic. It's also quite poignant that this has led to a lot of research into COVID-19, into immune suppression, and how we can protect our patients from immune suppression, how we change our gears to serve the patient community, and to serve the needs at the time. I think one thing that's been particularly striking is how much value we've all started giving to network and contact, to actually meeting people. When we look at the EHA Congress, we now have a record

number of registered attendees (over 15,000), which really brings home the message that, yes, online meetings are fine; yes, we can do a lot of production when we're far apart; however, there is a huge part of imagination, of thinking, of collaboration that happens face to face, and that is just human nature. All the enthusiasm around belonging to the congress and being part of the community has come back in, and that has had a huge impact on the haematology community. I think it's not so much the travelling, but the recognising how important these connections are, and how important the networks are, and how we really need to foster them. All the numbers of congresses, all the results that have come out of collaborations, have really pointed towards that. So I'm very happy that we've been able to contribute not only to increasing the research network, but to increasing the actual clinical and professional network as a result of COVID-19.

Q5 How do you manage the dual responsibilities of being Congress President and an active researcher, and how do you see your role evolving in the future with respect to this?

I must say that within the EHA, we have fantastic support of all the committee members in a very competent office that actually enables things to happen, and allows us to focus on the essential, and not on the nitty gritty. I'm very fortunate with that. Being President of a professional society, especially one that dedicates itself to the area that we work in, is really part of everyday life. So, my leadership role is very much to ensure that the whole community, be it medical school, be it work, be it the association, benefits from the actions that we do, and that we actually cater for them in those needs. Hopefully, my role in the future will really be to facilitate this more and more by bringing about more research grants, more networking opportunities, and increasing the educational footprint that EHA has in haematology in Europe.

Q6 What key pieces of advice would you offer to young researchers aspiring to build a career in haematology?

The piece of advice that was most striking and helpful for me was to be focused, and yet flexible. I know that sounds a little bit contradictory, but I think in life and in career, we all know where the centres of excellence are. We all know that we want to work with fantastic people, we want to have good mentors, and all that is very, very important. However, what you forget is that life sometimes throws opportunities at us that are unexpected; while we're busy focusing on our area

of interest, opportunities and other areas of interest come along that really can mould our lives and our careers. That was very much my case. I started off as a red cell specialist, with a huge interest in red cells, ended up by doing a PhD in something totally unrelated, inherited GPI deficiency, and then moved to Portugal from the UK where I dedicated myself to myeloid neoplasms. This sort of flexibility, I think, is so enriching within haematology, which is such a vast field. For me, to have this flexibility has really been a game changer, and really enabled me to advance my career without necessarily being stuck in areas that might not have progressed along. So, be curious, and be interested in all of haematology. It's so rich, and it's so valuable to be able to do everything

that you know; you don't really need to be limited to one field of haematology. Just be open to what comes your way.

Q7 What do you find to be the most rewarding aspects of your work as a haematologist?

I think the most rewarding aspects is how fast haematology moves; and how we can really see changing practices in how we treat diseases, how we help patients, and how quickly research comes into clinical practice. I think that speed of translation, that speed of research, is really, really exciting in haematology, and it goes all the way from having exciting research to seeing it being put into practice, and seeing the patients benefit from it. So I

think the translational aspect of haematology is definitely the most exciting part of it all.

Q8 From your professional experience, what are some of the most significant challenges faced by haematologists in the clinical setting today?

Well, I think there are two big challenges. One is the enormity of information, and the enormity of new options that come, which really makes being up to date a challenge, but also makes treatment choices challenging. I think, as we look to the future, we certainly need better guidance from experts and from panels, but we also need to be able to digest information, to be able to focus on what the patient has, and what the patient's needs are. The second important challenge is that the patient populations change; we have more and more informed patients. This is not challenging in a negative way, but in redefining our role as physicians, we end up by not having necessarily that traditional 'we know it all' 'God' role, but very much having a role of accompanying patients in their disease, in their lives, and helping them overcome the challenges of the disease. To take that step back and be the physician who accompanies patients, and does not dictate what the patient should be doing, is a change in mindset. That is very challenging, and very important nowadays.

