

TO: DCLG Members
From: Joyce Graff
Re: NCI Intramural Scientific Retreat
Date: 11 January 2008

I was privileged to attend the Intramural Scientific Retreat this year. The day was full and extremely impressive. The amount of talent assembled was truly amazing. It was wonderful to see the friendly collegial atmosphere, which is clearly nourishing the staff and keeping them happy at NCI, especially in these difficult financial times.

Dr. Niederhuber welcomed everyone and shared his thoughts on the frustratingly flat budgets expected for the next two years. He has, however, made room for some salary progression and expansion of the number of PIs, which was much appreciated by those in attendance.

The three keynote presentations were especially compelling:

Dr. Nancy E. Davidson from Johns Hopkins received the 7th Annual NCI Rosalind E. Franklin Award and shared her research on epigenetics (non-mutational changes in gene expression) in breast cancer. She is working with “de-methylation” agents, to see what effect they may have in slowing cancer progression in some breast cancers.

Sir Bruce Ponder of Cambridge UK (recently knighted for his work in cancer) received the 12th Annual Alfred G. Knudson Award in Cancer Genetics. Dr. Knudson was there to participate in the award ceremony, and share reminiscences that were fun to watch. Dr. Ponder spoke on “Polygenic Susceptibility to cancer and its practical implications.” Clearly multiple factors are at work, raising or lowering an individual’s susceptibility.

Dr. Dinah S. Singer of the Experimental Immunology Branch received the 4th Annual Alan S. Rabson award, and spoke on “New Perspectives on Transcription Initiation.” She described the findings of her team in the assembly and disassembly of some factors in the cell, as part of a mechanism of turning transcription on and off.

After each of the first two keynote talks, there were about 100 posters to explore. I read through the abstracts, chose 10 or so that I wanted to be sure to see, and then set out on my itinerary through the ballroom. The posters were a mechanism for teams to share what they are working on, or new “core” services available to be shared. For example, the DNA sequencing lab and a new “clinical molecular profiling core” provide cost-effective services to NIH teams. The Molecular profiling core brings full-genome sequencing to a practical level, to maximize our learning from clinical trials.

Many of the posters were works-in-progress rather than published results. This allowed for rich conversations and synergy among the teams. I’m sure that in the course of the day many projects received invaluable input from people they would not normally have asked to review their work.

One study of interest to me, for example, will do a retrospective study of a cohort of 200,000 people in the UK who received CT scans as children or young adults. Through the UK National Health Service Central Registry they will obtain mortality or subsequent cancer information. Particularly following the articles recently in the press, it will be extremely important to have some real data to determine how much of the concern about diagnostic radiation is in fact grounded in fact.

I was very impressed with the very high level of expertise evident all around me, and also with the high level of respect for Dr. Niederhuber and his steady guidance through these difficult times.