

British Society of Haematology Annual Scientific Meeting, April 2012

BSH returned to Glasgow this year for a great conference covering the full width of malignant and non-malignant haematology. It must be said, there were an impressive number of CLL talks that surely reflects the exciting times we are currently in for discovery and progress in the management of CLL. Indeed, at one point the only 2 oral sessions running in parallel were both CLL related!

This was the first year that the CLL Forum hosted a dedicated session. The programme was put together by Chris Fegan (Cardiff) who used his charm and contacts to bring Tait Shanefeld over from the Mayo Clinic and John Byrd from Ohio State. Unfortunately, his third speaker, John Seymour, was unable to make the trip over from Australia, so being slow to refuse, I made up the trio of speakers.

Tait Shanefeld explored the role of age, diet and environment in CLL. He addressed a range of issues from quality of life scores to how we actually manage patients on watch and wait programmes. He showed Mayo Clinic plotting infection risk in early stage CLL patients and discussed pre-emptive vaccination strategies. He also explored the difficult area of vitamin supplements – everything from vitamin D to green tea. It is very topical for patients – can they do anything to help themselves with their disease? Perhaps the vitamin D data is looking a bit more convincing.

John Byrd has been a leading light in the field of new therapeutic agents for CLL for a number of years. He has pioneered the development of a number of drugs and is closely involved with the development of the B-cell Receptor pathways antagonists. He brought us up to speed on the biology of BCR signalling and other signalling pathways in CLL. He talked a little about novel antibody therapies and cyclin dependent kinase inhibition, but his main focus was presenting emerging data on inhibitors of BCR kinases, particularly ibrutinib and GS-1101. He reviewed the biology / mechanism of action of these drugs and updated some of the remarkable response data from patients on these novel therapies. I think the most telling remark was in the questioning. When asked about the biology of resistance, John told us he had secured funding for a lab scientist to study biopsies from relapsing patients on these new therapies to work out how the leukaemic cells bypassed these kinase blockers to survive. However, the simple wonderful problem with this study – they had not been able to get material as so few patients had relapsed so far to date!

John Seymour's topic was looking at the long term complications of living with CLL. John has an established track record in this area and I was able to draw on some of his published work for my presentation. I reviewed some of our long term survival data from 281 Cambridge patients presenting over the last 20 years. I explored themes of balancing treatment intensity with co-morbidity profiles of patients. A great skill in managing CLL is striking that balance between the most effective therapy for the disease and what is best for the individual with you in clinic. I reviewed treatment-related mortality – a real issue, often overlooked, and how this can affect treatment decisions. Longer term follow-up of CLL patients clearly shows increased incidence of infection and second cancers compared with the general population and probably other cancer survivors. We need to follow these carefully and see whether the incidence of these later complications needs to influence early treatment decisions. Overall, however, the salutary reminder is that the majority of patients who start

treatment for CLL will die directly or indirectly from their disease rather than complications of therapy.

All in all, BSH was a great meeting for CLL. I think the plan for the UK CLL Forum to host a session with international speakers is excellent. Attendance was very high and feedback to me and other committee members was very positive.

Let me just sign off by reminding you all that the next UK CLL Forum meeting will be in London on Thursday 4th October (details on the website). We have a great range of CLL experts from across the UK giving a range of presentations, primarily on life beyond first line therapy. We also have the huge honour to welcome Rick Furman from Weill Cornell, New York to talk further on the new therapies in CLL.

With best wishes to you all, and thanks for supporting the UK CLL Forum

George Follows

UK CLL Forum Chair
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