

Ymchwil lechyd a Gofal Cymru Health and Care Research Wales



2023 - 2024 Annual report

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Front cover: left Dr Kevin Norris, WCRC Research Associate, right Dr Mat Clement, Research Fellow, WCRC at Grangetown Career and Role model week

The Wales Cancer Research Centre is funded by Welsh Government through Health and Care Research Wales.

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Wales Cancer Research Centre

INTRODUCTION



The Wales Cancer Research Centre strength in Wales, and on bringing (WCRC) is a research development researchers and institutions together infrastructure funded by Health and Care Research Wales, hosted by Cardiff University and delivered in partnership with higher education and NHS organisations across Wales. We provide strategic oversight and coordination, directly fund promising researchers, and promote cooperation between Since 1st April 2023, we have supported stakeholders across Wales.

research in Wales, by providing leadership for and directly supporting research within the six priority research themes identified in Wales' cancer clinicians, academics, bioinformaticians research strategy (CReSt):

- •
- ٠ Immuno-oncology
- Radiotherapy •
- Cancer clinical trials ٠
- Supportive and palliative oncology
- research.

to work collaboratively to create a thriving and sustainable cancer research workforce. Growing this research base will in turn attract increased investment into Wales from third sector and industry partners to catalyse further progress.

cancer researchers, institutions and the recruitment of a community of around 30 cancer researchers, based within 6 different organisations (Cardiff, Our mandate is to revitalise cancer Swansea and Bangor Universities, Velindre University NHS Trust, Cardiff and Vale University Health Board [UHB] and Swansea Bay UHB). These include and data scientists, who are conducting research across the whole spectrum Precision and mechanistic oncology from discovery science, to behavioural science, to clinical trials.

Over the last year, we have intensified our focus on bringing researchers Population-based health promotion, together, most notably in the WCRC early detection and health services Cancer Research Conference held at the National Museum of Wales in March 2024. Delegates heard talks by cancer Diolch yn fawr iawn. During the last year, we have been researchers from across Wales, as well focusing on establishing career-track as keynote speakers from around the Prof. Mererid Evans, Director research positions in areas of research UK and patient and public involvement

representatives, and met some of our up-and-coming stars of the future at the poster and poster prize sessions.

We have also launched a cross-theme bioinformatics initiative, the Wales Cancer Bioinformatics Network, which had its inaugural meeting in March 2024, and we continue to develop a wide-ranging programme of outreach and engagement events, via which the public can gain insight to the cuttingedge cancer research being conducted here in Wales.

This report gives a flavour of some of the amazing work being carried out by our cancer research community, which will contribute to improving cancer outcomes. None of what is presented in this report could have been achieved without the hard work of our funded researchers, the engagement of the whole cancer research community in Wales, and the support of our funders, Health and Care Research Wales.

OUR RESEARCH IN NUMBERS

Core Metrics Reporting period: 2023/2024

Research Wales to the group





CENTRE STRUCTURE 2023/24

WCRC ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP

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WCRC HUB TEAM	WCRC LAY RESEARCH PARTNERS	CREST THEME LEADS	FU
Image: Strategy Image: Strategy	Julie Hepburn BartnerBob McAlister CReSt Research Partner	 Cohort of 12 academic leaders responsible for: coordinating research activity for their theme acting as champions for research in their area identifying opportunities for collective progress within and across thematic areas 	Coho or pa base Card Swar Bang Velin Card Healt Swar
Plus ~4FTE of comms, project, scientific project manager and admin support	Plus 5 more Research Partners aligned to CReSt themes		Healt Betsi Healt

Member of WCRC Senior Leadership Group

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WCRC NDED RESEARCHERS

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KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

Building a Cancer Research Community launching the Wales Cancer Research Conference

The Wales Cancer Research Conference Partner for the WCRC said: 2024 was held on Monday 4 March at the National Museum Cardiff, bringing together cancer researchers and stakeholders from across the UK. The event, hosted by the WCRC, aimed to very constructive conversations with celebrate recent successes in cancer researchers, some of whom I'd never met research, share plans for the future, and provide a platform for networking and collaboration.

The conference opened with keynote speakers addressing critical topics in cancer research and began with Prof Eva Morris (Oxford University) delving into the power of cancer data and emphasising potential future directions for the UK. Dr Andrew Furness (The Royal Marsden) then explored the emerging landscape of solid tumour cellular therapies, discussing current which showcased the innovative perspectives and future advances and Julie Hepburn (WCRC) and Lowri Griffiths (Wales Cancer Alliance) followed with a presentation on patient and public involvement (PPI) in cancer research.

"The WCRC Conference was a fullon active day for me. It was a great networking opportunity, and I had some before – a very satisfying day overall."

The conference then continued with breakout sessions featuring guest speakers exploring topics under the six CReSt (Wales Cancer Research Strategy) themes and ended with a panel discussion and questions on addressing socioeconomic inequity in cancer detection and diagnosis.

One of the highlights of the event were the superb posters on display cancer research taking place across Wales. There were three prizes available for posters and they were judged in categories that celebrate the variety of research disciplines championed across Wales: patient and public involvement, Julie Hepburn, Lead Lay Research scientific excellence, and impact in

practice. The winning posters were Dr Michelle Edwards for her poster: 'Patient and Public Involvement in a Pan European Palliative Care Study: the Serenity study PPI protocol' (PPI), Dr Luned Badder for her poster 'Delivery of suicide therapies using a precision virotherapy; novel approaches for pancreatic cancer' (Scientific Excellence), and Dr Daniel Turnham for his work on 'Preclinical evaluation of a novel antibody drug conjugate for prostate cancer' (Impact in Practice).

Visitors praised the conference for its inspiring content; India Tresadern from the All-Wales Medical Genomics Service said

"I spent a brilliant day at the Wales Cancer Research Conference. It's so easy to forget that cancer research exists outside of the context in which you work with it; it was a privilege to see a variety of talks showcasing groundbreaking cancer research from all angles and it was an amazing opportunity for reflecting on how my own work on





the QuicDNA study ties into the wider clinical picture. Thank you to the WCRC for coordinating such an insightful and well-rounded day, I hope I can come back armed with a poster in years to come!"

Alongside the talks, networking sessions and posters, the conference also featured a number of exhibitor stands which were run by conference sponsors and partners of the WCRC. These included Health and Care Research Wales, Tenovus, AstraZeneca, Cytiva, Cancer Research Wales, Advanced Therapies Wales, Centre for Trials Research, the Wales Cancer Biobank, the Wales Cancer Bioinformatics Network and the WCRC Patient and Public Involvement team. Roche and the Wales Cancer Network were also in attendance as sponsors and networked with visitors throughout the day. Exhibitors were welcome to attend the conference talks and many attendees took the opportunity interact with them but also had the opportunity to talk to visitors about their areas of expertise and make connections during the networking sessions.

The Wales Cancer Research Conference 2024 not only celebrated achievements but also served as a platform to strengthen collaboration to advance the aims of CReSt. The WCRC is very grateful to all speakers, sponsors, exhibitors and attendees for making this such a successful and engaging event that we hope to build on in 2025.



WCRC accelerating brain cancer research in Wales





Above: Dr Mat Clement, Research Fellow, WCRC

Dr Mat Clement receives prestigious Future Leaders Fellowship from the Brain Tumour Charity

Dr Mat Clement, Research Fellow into the mechanisms underlying GBM funded by the WCRC, has been awarded a Future Leaders Fellowship by the Brain Tumour Charity, showing the potential in his research project 'Manipulating T-cell immune responses in order to improve anti-Glioblastoma immunity.

Glioblastoma (GBM), an aggressive and currently incurable form of brain cancer, presents a daunting challenge. Current treatment options, including surgery, and for that I am very grateful." chemotherapy, and radiotherapy, often prove insufficient, with tumours recurring despite intervention. In this context, Dr Clement's research is aiming to revolutionise treatment through harnessing the power of the immune system. His research focuses on understanding and manipulating T-cell responses, pivotal players in the body's T-cells in Glioblastoma and will position immune defence system, to enhance their anti-tumour capabilities. Drawing from his extensive background in studying immune responses to chronic viral infections and neurodegeneration, Dr Clement brings a wealth of knowledge and expertise to this of our future stars. His project is a highly research project. His interdisciplinary novel area, built on his previous work in approach aims to unlock new insights viral infection and Alzheimers disease. It

progression and pave the way for novel therapeutic interventions.

Expressing his gratitude for the support received from the WCRC, Dr Clement remarked, "I'm absolutely over the moon to receive this Fellowship, I couldn't have done it without the WCRC supporting me and investing in me, the Centre has made a massive difference to my career

Prof Awen Gallimore, Dr Clement's mentor, Co-Director of the Systems Immunity University Research Institute (SIURI) and Immuno-oncology theme lead for CReSt said: "Mat is uniquely placed to capitalise on his research experience in studying the role of himself between world-leading brain cancer researchers, immunologists and neuroscientists within Cardiff University. He is distinguished by his cross-disciplinary and collaborative approach and widely recognised as one

is exciting that he is able to bring these insights into brain cancer research."

Prof Mererid Evans, Director at the WCRC said: "Dr Mat Clement's achievement is a source of immense pride for the WCRC. We are absolutely delighted, and the entire team joins me in congratulating him. A Future Leaders Fellowship, such as this, epitomises the aspirations we hold for our funded researchers. Mat's success serves as a shining example of the calibre of talent we aim to nurture and support across Wales. We look forward to continuing our mission of empowering more exceptional researchers like Mat in the future"

> "I couldn't have done it without the WCRC supporting me and investing in me, the Centre has made a massive difference to my career' Dr Mat Clement



Above: Dr James Powell, Clinical Academic, WCRC

WCRC Clinical Academic Dr James Powell appointed as Clinical Lead for new Brain Tumour Research Initiative (BATRI)

Dr James Powell, Consultant Clinical Oncologist at Velindre Cancer Centre funding calls will open twice a year, and Clinical Academic at the WCRC, is leading the Brain Tumour Research Initiative (BATRI), a new brain tumour research initiative funded by Cancer Research Wales (CRW).

A first for Wales, BATRI aims to bring only independent cancer research together academic and clinical leaders to develop and build a thriving critical mass of brain tumour research in Wales. It is an opportunity that will help to build focus within the research done in Wales, which is a key recommendation of the CReSt strategy.

Dr Powell said: "I am proud to be leading on this fantastic national initiative which will enable us to develop new and innovative brain tumour research in Wales which we hope will support better outcomes for patients with brain tumours. Every year in Wales more than 400 people develop a brain tumour but unfortunately very few new treatments have been developed in the last 40 years. With this significant support from Cancer Research Wales we now have critical new, sustainable funding to put a huge difference to our knowledge brain tumour research on a national footing and really make progress"

Brain tumour research has been historically underfunded, receiving less than 2% of annual cancer research funding in the UK. Cancer Research Wales will give BATRI £1m each year for the next three years. For 2023-2024 there also a Clinical Academic in radiotherapy

will be one funding call, but eventually, inviting applications from researchers with new and innovative brain tumour research proposals.

Dr Lee Campbell, Head of Research at Cancer Research Wales said: "As Wales' charity, CRW, is proud to set up this important research initiative that has strategic significance for all of Wales. Our long-term investment in brain tumour research will ensure that the talented clinicians and scientists we have working in the area will receive the necessary resources to make a difference. We hope this will lead to a better understanding of the disease which will translate into new treatments and therapeutic strategies."

Dr Kathy Seddon, WCRC Patient and Public Involvement Research Partner, has also been involved with the launch of BATRI as a PPI contributor said: "I am delighted with the news about BATRI as my late husband died from a brain tumour. CRW are really making and understanding in this area. It is an honour to be part of the steering group for this initiative as a PPI contributor and a member of the WCRC Multi Disciplinary Research Group (MDRG) for brain cancer."

Alongside his role at Velindre, Dr Powell is



"We now have critical new sustainable funding to put brain tumour research on a national footing and really make progress" **Dr James Powell**

funded by the WCRC and currently co-leads the Centre's MDRG for brain cancer with Dr Florian Siebzehnrubl (Senior Lecturer at Cardiff University, Deputy Director of the European Stem Cell Institute.and scientific lead for BATRI), which brings together specialists to discuss and collaborate on research ideas that align with the all-Wales cancer research strategy (CReSt).

Dr Powell said: "BATRI builds on the success of the MDRG by taking a national, strategic and coordinated approach to areas of priority for brain tumour research, and then providing funding for projects that tackle these priorities. "We are very excited by this initiative and hope this new funding will provide real opportunities and support for researchers in Wales to develop their research programmes and become world leaders in the field of brain tumour research"

HIGHLIGHTS

WCRC research addressing inequalities in cancer prevention and detection



Supporting Wales' first Lung Health Check pilot

WCRC funded Research Fellow Dr Grace McCutchan has helped to launch an innovative new Lung Health Check pilot within Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board (UHB).

The pilot led by Cwm Taf Morgannwg UHB and the Wales Cancer Network, launched in September 2023 and is the first Lung Health Check in Wales. It will inform implementation of a future lung cancer screening programme in Wales. Working with GP surgeries in North Rhondda, the pilot programme will offer a low-dose CT lung screening scan to around 500 patients who are high-risk for lung cancer.

Research shows that lung cancers detected through Lung Health Checks cancer screening programme in Wales." are more likely to be found at an earlier stage, and potentially reduce the risk of dying from lung cancer by around 20%. Grace is a member of the pilot's Clinical Steering Group and her role is to provide evidence-based behavioral science advice to enhance public participation and integrated prevention. To do this Grace helped to develop public facing

information materials using language that could be easily understood and by using evidence-based preinvitation and GP endorsement.

Professor Kate Brain, in the Division of Population Medicine, Cardiff University and co-lead of CReSt theme 6, said:

"Lung Health Checks will help us to find more lung cancers in the earlier stages. This means more patients will be able to access treatment and ultimately improve outcomes for lung cancer. The launch of the Lung Health Check pilot programme in Cwm Taf Morgannwg is a really exciting step for Wales. It will provide vital evidence to inform the roll-out of a future lung

Grace's research has focused on reducing socioeconomic inequalities in cancer and how best to encourage early diagnosis through screening, encourage symptomatic help-seeking, and support cancer prevention. She has been involved with the Yorkshire Cancer Research-funded YESS (Yorkshire

Enhanced Stop Smoking) study, led by Prof's Rachael Murray and Mat Callister at Nottingham University.

The YESS study aims to test how best to support patients to quit smoking when they attend lung cancer screening. Findings from this study will inform the development of a strategy to support smoking cessation within lung cancer screening in Wales.







Dr Grace McCutchan selected for GW4 Crucible programme



Dr Grace McCutchan, Research Fellow at the WCRC, was selected to join the GW4 Crucible 2024 programme. This highly competitive initiative brings together 30 future research leaders to develop interdisciplinary approaches for tackling health inequalities. The GW4 Crucible, renowned for fostering innovative and collaborative research, offers participants a unique opportunity to enhance their careers through a series of hybrid events, including inmasterclasses.

Dr McCutchan's acceptance into the GW4 Crucible is a testament to her significant professional aspirations. By participating, contributions to cancer research. Her she was able to broaden the impact of work focuses on supporting equitable her research, exploring creative and access to cancer screening, prevention, inequalities.

In her research, Dr McCutchan uses leader in behavioural science research, behavioural science methods to address socioeconomic inequalities by understanding and combatting psychosocial barriers to early cancer detection and prevention. Notably, she has led the development of two Reflecting on her participation, Dr behavioural interventions to promote McCutchan said: "GW4 Crucible prompt medical help-seeking for vague cancer symptoms to support a collaborate with researchers from vastly new referral pathway, and to support different disciplines," she said. "This smoking cessation within lung cancer has allowed me to think more broadly screening. Testing of these interventions was funded by Cancer Research Wales innovative approaches to addressing and Yorkshire Cancer Research and have health inequalities." the potential to improve population

Dr Pam Smith secures FLiCR award to enhance diversity in PPI

Dr Pamela Smith, WCRC Patient and Public Involvement Academic Lead, has successfully obtained a Future Leaders in Cancer Research (FLiCR) award, securing £4,500 in funding. This award, supported by lead mentor Prof Kate Brain and collaborator Dr Grace McCutchan, aims to improve diversity in Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) in cancer screening, prevention and early diagnosis (SPED)-based research.

Dr Smith's project focuses on establishing a panel of individuals with a history of smoking who reside in areas of high socioeconomic deprivation. This panel will play a crucial role in shaping research proposals and supporting ongoing studies with a focus on lung health and smoking-related issues. Prevention and early diagnosis research is essential to improve cancer outcomes, and is an area of research strength in Wales as identified in CReSt.

Dr Smith has conducted online and in-person workshops to raise awareness of and engagement with



Above: Dr Pam Smith at an in-person workshop

The response to the workshops so far has been positive, with a number of attendees expressing interest in joining SPED research. With support from WCRC lay partners (Julie Hepburn and Bob include involving panel members in the development of ongoing research

person residential labs and online health and impact policy.

The GW4 Crucible programme aligned perfectly with Dr McCutchan's novel solutions to health inequalities and and early diagnosis services to reduce social justice issues. The programme's focus on leadership and impact training also supported her goal of becoming a dedicated to reducing health disparities in cancer. The GW4 Crucible consisted of two-day residential labs and four online masterclasses.

> provided a unique platform to about my research's impact and develop

research involvement opportunities. projects including soliciting their feedback on key study documents and conducting more involvement workshops. Dr Smith is also gathering the panel and being involved in future reflections from workshops attendees and potential panel panels to better understand the optimal methods McAlister), the next steps in this work of engaging and sustaining underrepresented groups in PPI.

WCRC leading radiotherapy research in Wales



WCRC Clinical Academic helping to build the future of radiotherapy research in Wales

Dr James Powell, is the WCRC CReSt lead for radiotherapy. He shares his thoughts on the importance of a collaborative delivery by using the latest and most radiotherapy research landscape across modern imaging techniques and We aim to provide opportunities Wales.

"This is a hugely exciting and interesting time to be involved in radiotherapy research. Technological advances with radiotherapy machines are allowing treatments to be delivered more precisely, more effectively and with leading clinical trials that assess the fewer side effects than ever before.

As a long-established treatment for cancer, radiotherapy already forms an important component of treatment in a fleet of state-of-the-art radiotherapy around 50% of patients with cancer. equipment. This is a hugely exciting time Radiotherapy research is a huge team effort involving researchers from lots of different specialties, including medics, physicists, radiographers and scientists working, for example, in genetics and immunology.

increasing the precision of radiotherapy reducing potential side effects. We believe that developments in these areas will have a significant impact on radiotherapy research in the coming vears.

Wales has a strong track record in effectiveness of new radiotherapy treatments. In addition, Welsh Government is investing in building the new Velindre Cancer Centre with for radiotherapy development in Cardiff and Wales, providing the potential for this new equipment and technology to benefit patients across Wales.

Over the coming years, we aim to grow the radiotherapy research infrastructure This research work ensures that the and support and foster collaboration effectiveness of radiotherapy treatment between researchers and clinicians in continues to be improved, for example Wales. We believe this will encourage by combining radiotherapy with other new radiotherapy research ideas and

treatments such as targeted drugs or help advance radiotherapy research across Wales.

> for clinical fellowships and support early career researchers with time for radiotherapy research, supporting career development within the field. We hope to support and grow unique areas of strength in radiotherapy research in Wales, complementing our established track record of leadership in clinical radiotherapy research. Building on these areas of strength will allow us to be more competitive in future funding bids.

> We are committed to involving patients and their caregivers in the design of new radiotherapy research studies. This will ensure that we maintain a firm focus on the research areas important to patients and that patients continue to shape the research studies that they participate in maximising patient's participation in radiotherapy research studies in Wales."

CReSt theme lead for radiotherapy secures new funding for **ARC Academy**

Dr James Powell, Clinical Academic at the WCRC and Consultant Oncologist at Velindre Cancer Centre has led on a bid that has been awarded a total of £3 million to establish the Advancing Radiotherapy Cymru (ARC) Academy. The Moondance Foundation pledged £1.5 million over five years and Velindre's Charitable Funds Committee has agreed to match this funding, achieving £3 million to launch the ARC Academy.

The ARC Academy will be an all-Wales programme supporting best practice in radiotherapy through clinical service developments, workforce recruitment,

development and training, and clinical Dr James Powell said: radiotherapy research for the benefit of all patients receiving radiotherapy in "ARC will ensure that radiotherapy Wales.

Key objectives of the ARC Academy will be to drive innovation in radiotherapy treatment to deliver better outcomes and improve quality of life and patient experience, whilst providing equity of care to cancer patients across Wales. It is an initiative that will harness the talent, drive and opportunity at this pivotal time in cancer care, as we work with colleagues from the breadth of Wales.



Above: Dr James Powell being interviewed about ARISTOCRAT for the BBC news

Advancing patient recruitment on the ARISTOCRAT clinical trial

An important UK-wide clinical trial utilising a cannabis-derived drug for the treatment of aggressive brain tumours has recently opened at Velindre Cancer Centre.

Funded by The Brain Tumour Charity, the three-year Phase II trial, named ARISTOCRAT, is being led at Velindre by Consultant Oncologist Dr Jillian Maclean.

Working alongside her is Neurooncology team lead and WCRC Clinical Academic Dr James Powell who is actively involved in patient recruitment. The research team has achieved the milestone of enrolling their first Having additional treatment options to

patient, with more participants lined up to join in the near future. The trial aims to recruit over 230 patients with glioblastoma, across 14 NHS hospitals in Great Britain in 2023. Throughout the trial, participants will self-administer nabiximols (Sativex), a cannabis extract, or a placebo oral spray, and will undergo regular follow-up, including blood tests and MRI scans conducted by the clinical trial team.

Dr James Powell said "Unfortunately, outcomes for patients with recurrent glioblastoma remain poor, so having this important trial open to offer to these patients is hugely encouraging.

developments remain a key component of advancing cancer treatment in Wales, and will provide training opportunities for staff working within the radiotherapy service - supporting recruitment and retention of the highest guality staff to work in Wales. Most importantly, the ARC Academy will make a vital difference to the lives of many patients throughout Wales reducing variation and inequalities in provision."

"Having additional treatment options for glioblastoma patients is a significant development" **Dr James Powell**

offer to these patients is significant and this trial is also addressing the important clinical question around the utility of cannabis-based medication for patients with brain tumours. Glioblastoma is the most aggressive form of brain cancer and typically has an average survival of less than 10 months after recurrence. Encouraging insights from the 2021 Phase I clinical trial, involving 27 patients, indicate that nabiximols, when combined with chemotherapy, is well tolerated by patients and has the potential to extend the lives of patients with recurrent glioblastoma."

WCRC investing in cancer data and bioinformatics research in Wales

Significant progress is being made in an initiative aimed at understanding the data that is available in Wales and improving its use for cancer research. Since November, WCRC researchers Dr Laura Baker and Dr Arron Lacev have been dedicating their efforts to understanding the cancer data available within the Secure Information Information Linkage Databank (SAIL Databank). Their work includes collating metadata and publicly available information from various sources and planning exploratory analyses to draft a series of 'data explained' outputs. These outputs are intended to provide a strong foundation for researchers interested in population-level cancer data in Wales.

This exploratory review of the cancer Simon Thompson. "We are building a data has now received approvals from the SAIL independent Information Governance Review Panel (IGRP).

SAIL project, I have started applying my knowledge to the data we have access to and developing a draft of the initial data explained outputs," Dr Baker said. "This information will be requested from the SAIL trusted research environment (TRE) once ready, and once approved following the standard SAIL disclosure control process can then be shared across the group and with the public."

The recruitment of Dr Baker and Dr Lacey and their development as cancer data scientists is part of the WCRC's plan to support and expand the use of cancer data in Wales, in collaboration with the SAIL Databank and Population Data Science group at Swansea University with Professor Ashley Akbari and comprehensive knowledge base on Welsh cancer data," Dr Baker added. "We hope to disseminate this knowledge to "Now that we have approvals for the encourage further research among the

cancer research community in Wales and beyond."

This initiative promises to enhance the quality and accessibility of cancer data, fostering more impactful research. As the project advances, it aims to contribute valuable insights into cancer trends and outcomes, ultimately informing public health strategies and potential improvements to services and patient care in Wales and beyond.

> "We are building a comprehensive knowledge base on Welsh cancer data to encourage further research among the cancer research community in Wales and beyond" Dr Laura Baker

CReSt core bioinformatician appointed to support and up-skill cancer researchers in Wales

the core bioinformatician for the Wales enhance work across all CReSt themes. Cancer Research Strategy (CReSt) at the WCRC. Alex is an expert in cancer Alex said: "There is a plethora of research with a focus on skin cancer publicly available cancer data out and brings invaluable experience in there that is waiting to be utilised by RNA sequencing and single cell RNA other cancer researchers. This data sequencing bioinformatics analyses.

cancer researchers across Wales with their bioinformatics needs. The primary objective is to enhance researcher's skills be put off as it can be a daunting task, and equip them with the necessary tools for effective data analysis. This support will be provided through various means, including directing researchers to relevant learning resources and offering hands-on teaching and tutorials.

has been made possible through the WCRC's CReSt Catalytic Funding 2023to developing the Welsh cancer for more funding.

Dr Alex Gibbs has been appointed as bioinformatics community, which will

may enable researchers to answer their research questions without the need of In this new role, Alex aims to support performing the sequencing themselves. People who don't have the experience required to analyse this public data may however, I am here to help with this!"

Looking ahead, Alex envisions a future where cancer researchers in Wales are empowered to conduct their bioinformatics analyses and integrate bioinformatics seamlessly into their The funding for this pivotal position research. He hopes that the assistance he provides will encourage researchers to include bioinformatics in future grant 25, reflecting the Centre's commitment applications, ultimately paving the way



Above: Dr Alex Gibbs

Alongside these activities, Alex is building a Welsh network of Cancer bioinformaticians to share expertise and represent Wales in international cancer networks through the Wales Cancer **Bioinformatics Network.**



created.

•

hosting

featuring

expertise.

insights. conducting

development.

the network.

Launching the Wales Cancer Bioinformatics Network

Network (WCBN) had its inaugural meeting on March 20, 2024, marking the beginning of a collaborative journey to advance cancer research through Additionally, the group discussed bioinformatics.

The meeting, brought together 25 people from Cardiff University, Swansea University, and the All-Wales Medical Genomics Service (AWMGS - NHS). Through interactive tools like Mentimeter and whiteboarding sessions, participants shared their backgrounds in bioinformatics and articulated their expectations from the network.

Key discussions were had on how the group should operate a roadmap was established for future endeavours with focus on fostering collaboration, providing training and education, organising in-person and virtual events, sharing resources, enhancing communication, and managing data effectively.

It was a greed that the creation of a nonline community space for communication Alex Gibbs, CReSt core bioinformatician and knowledge exchange would be useful. Subsequently a Slack group (a



VISIT YOUTUBE VIDEO

JOIN THE WCBN

catering to different interests has been

several new initiatives including:

four annual events, prominent speakers and topical discussions to enrich

introducing a weekly bioinformatics clinic, offering a dedicated platform troubleshoot challenges, and share

comprehensive training sessions and personalised one-to-one data clinics, aimed at empowering members at all proficiency levels and fostering skill

creating avenues for grant applications and extending support in grant writing, facilitating the pursuit of research ambitions within

and network lead said:

The Wales Cancer Bioinformatics messaging app) with multi-channels "The WCBN's first meeting was a massive success! We had a strong turnout and lots of engagement from the members. Together, we discussed how we want the network to be operated and proposed a 'way forward'. I have since set up a Slack group for the network, which will be the base of operations for the network."

> The network is open to anyone who analyses cancer data in the course of their research, including PhD students, who want to learn more or make for members to seek assistance, conections in the bioinformatics space.

> > "We want this network to encourage collaboration and the sharing of knowledge and expertise, representing Wales in international cancer networks" Dr Alex Gibbs

WCRC fostering growth and connectivity in research careers



Dr Andrew Pierce Lecturer in Precision Cancer Medicine, (CRest Theme 1) **Bangor University**

"As a scientist deeply immersed in the realm of haemopoietic stem cell biology, my research has always been driven by a singular goal: improving patient outcomes. My focus, particularly on myeloid leukaemias, has steered me towards innovative approaches, including drug repurposing. This strategy significantly reduces the hurdles in drug development, such as toxicity and pharmacodynamic profiling, thereby accelerating the journey from

lab bench to clinical bedside and cutting costs.

One of my most notable achievements was a study published in Nature in 2016. This "bench to bedside" research utilised a proteomic screen of primary leukaemic progenitor cells, leading to the identification of a potential cure for chronic myeloid leukaemia (CML). This discovery progressed to a phase 2 clinical trial (CRUK/17/016 TASTER), a significant milestone in cancer stem cell research.

Building on this success, similar methodologies have uncovered potential treatments for other challenging conditions. In Leukemia (2017), we reported promising findings for Polycythemia vera, followed by significant advancements in Juvenile Myelomonocytic leukemia (JPR, 2020) and another impactful study on CML (PlosOne, 2022).

In 2019, a study published in Hemasphere revealed the potential of repurposing the drug BGB324 for treating myeloproliferative neoplasms (MPNs). The compelling results prompted the drug's developers to investigate its efficacy further, culminating in a 2021 study that recommended clinical trials for MPN treatment.

Beyond cancer therapies, my work in

biomarker discovery has also been rewarding. Early detection is crucial for improving outcomes, particularly for endometrial cancer, the most common gynaecological malignancy in highincome countries and a significant concern in Wales. Recent studies published in eBioMedicine (2024) and British Journal of Cancer (2023) have identified potential biomarkers in cervico-vaginal fluid, urine, and plasma, currently being validated for a noninvasive endometrial cancer detection test.

Recently, I relocated to the North-West Cancer Research Institute at Bangor University. Relocating and re-establishing an active research programme can be daunting, however, the WCRC has been instrumental in easing this transition. They have facilitated new networks within Wales and the diverse research community at WCRC has opened doors to exciting new collaborative opportunities, enhancing our collective ability to combat cancer".

> "WCRC has facilitated new networks within Wales which has opened doors to exciting new ollaborative opportunities' **Dr Andrew Pierce**



Above: Dr Andrew Pierce presenting his research at the WCRC Researcher Networking Day



Dr Ashley Poon-King Clinical Reseach Fellow (CReSt theme 3) Velindre/Cardiff University

"I am currently an ST7 clinical oncology registrar and researcher at the WCRC. After migrating from Trinidad and Tobago in 2007, I earned my medical degree with honours from the University of Birmingham in 2012. My foundational medical training took place in the West Midlands, and in 2014, I moved to South Wales to complete my core medical training before embarking on my clinical oncology registrar training in 2016.

A significant milestone in my career has been receiving WCRC funding,

which has allowed me to serve as a early-phase trial design and the grant clinical research fellow in radiotherapy, genomics, and immunology while pursuing a 2-year MD degree at Cardiff University. My research focuses on the relationship between telomere length, function, and clinical outcomes in head and neck cancer patients. Telomeres, the protective caps at the ends of chromosomes, can become critically shortened and dysfunctional in cancer, Additionally, the WCRC has given me the leading to genomic instability and driving cancer progression. My project also examines how radiotherapy affects leukocyte telomere length, potentially serving as a marker of immune aging.

In addition to my research, I dedicate one day a week to the Cardiff Cancer Research Hub, providing clinical support for solid tumour and haematology trials at the University Hospital of Wales (UHW). This role has given me the trials and haematology teams, enriching my experience in clinical trial design and implementation.

Since joining the WCRC, I have had numerous opportunities to enhance my clinical skills and broaden my research horizons. In January, I was honoured to be selected for the annual ECMC Junior Investigator Network Group (JING) in Manchester. This residential course was instrumental in deepening my understanding of



application process. JING also provided an invaluable platform to network with fellow nominees from Cardiff and across the UK. Meeting and being supported by an amazing faculty of experts, consisting of a multidisciplinary group of both clinical and non-clinical researchers was an incredibly enriching experience.

chance to engage with the community and promote cancer research as a career path. Recently, I participated in the Cardiff School of Medicine's 'Science in Health Live! ' event, where I interacted with year 12 students from across Wales, offering them guidance and inspiration for their own career journeys. I am also eagerly anticipating hosting sixth form students for the In2STEM work experience programme in July which aims to provide young people chance to collaborate with early phase from disadvantaged backgrounds high-quality opportunities and career support.

> Looking ahead, my immediate goals include completing my MD project and submitting my thesis, with the hope of contributing valuable publications to the field of oncology. I also plan to continue my active involvement in the development of the Cardiff Cancer Research Hub, striving to advance our understanding and treatment of cancer."

WCRC fostering growth and connectivity in research careers



Dr Namrata Rastogi Cross-Theme Research Associate Cardiff University

"My academic journey began at the Central Drug Research Institute (CDRI) in India, where I pursued a PhD focusing on the translational aspects of drug screening. This experience ignited my interest in connecting molecular biology to tangible patient benefits. Following my PhD, I completed a brief postdoctoral fellowship at King George's Medical University, where I investigated microRNAs as biomarkers for breast cancer resistance.

I then moved to Cardiff University in the UK, where I delved into blood cell development and cancer research. My work in Cardiff has led to significant breakthroughs, including the identification of Nuclear Factor I-C (NFIC) in Acute Myeloid Leukaemia (AML). Seeking to expand my independent research network and acquire new skills, I joined the European Cancer Stem Cell Research Institute (ECSCRI) at Cardiff University as a Research Associate in AML research. My recent projects, supported by the WCRC, have allowed me to develop my own research ideas and generate preliminary data for future advanced research fellowships, with the ultimate goal of establishing my own lab focused on AML Translational Therapeutics.

As an Early Career Researcher in cancer biology with a nine-year background, my contributions extend beyond the laboratory, aiming to impact both the scientific community and society. My patient-centric and translational research focuses on precision medicine, bridging molecular biology and patient outcomes. Currently, I am using AML, an aggressive and deadly form of blood cancer, as my model system. This disease primarily affects elderly populations, where the outcome is often poor.

My research identifies molecules prevalent in cancer cells that are crucial for their growth and survival. Understanding these molecules can lead to the development of targeted therapies that kill cancer cells while sparing normal cells. This approach aims to provide better treatment options and improve survival rates for patients who and have been shortlisted for an are often unfit for current therapies, ensuring every patient has an equal chance of high-quality treatment.

The two-year joint funding from WCRC has been instrumental in my career. It has enabled significant progress in my ongoing project on TET2 activation in AML using a novel agonist, which is in advanced stages and expected to result in a high-quality research article. WCRC funding also facilitated the development of new research ideas exploring NFIC as a biomarker or therapeutic target in AML, and helped forge new networks, generating preliminary data for my research fellowships.

Beyond research outputs, WCRC support has also contributed to my career and professional development. I participated in the Elevate Leadership programme for women from ethnic minority communities at Cardiff University, where I learned the importance of selfreflection and self-confidence essential for leadership roles. I also earned a teaching certificate of Associate Fellow in Higher Education Academy, enhancing my teaching skills for a future academic career. Additionally, attending the 6th International Conference on Acute Myeloid Leukemia in Portugal (2023)

allowed me to meet renowned clinicians and researchers in AML, leading to a new collaboration with Prof. Caroline Heckman from Finland, a leading expert in AML precision medicine.

WCRC has also supported my Public Patient Involvement (PPI) activities, enabling me to participate in public engagement and networking events. These interactions have helped me frame relevant research questions, essential for future research endeavours.

My future plan is to apply for intermediate and advanced research fellowships to establish my own research group in AML translational therapeutics within ECSCRI, Cardiff University. I have already applied for the Health Care Research Wales-Advanced Fellowship (January 2024) interview. Additionally, I plan to apply for fellowships such as the Blood Cancer UK and Medical Research Council joint-funded Career Development Award later this year. Through these opportunities, I aspire to continue making impactful contributions to cancer research and patient care".

"Support from the WCRC enabled me to participate in the Elevate Leadership programme for women from ethinic minority communities" Dr Namrata Rastogi

Dr Kevin Norris **Research Associate** (CReSt Theme 1) **Cardiff University**

Dr Kate Liddiard Lecturer in cancer genomics (CReSt Theme 1) Cardiff University

In the rapidly advancing field of cancer genomics, two WCRC researchers are making significant strides. Dr Kevin Norris and Dr Kate Liddiard, both based at Cardiff University, are driving forward Dr Norris said: "The WCRC have been the understanding and treatment of cancer through innovative approaches in telomere biology and genomics technologies.

Dr. Kevin Norris began his research career with a PhD in the telomere biology group at Cardiff University, where he investigated how chromosomal structure impacts telomere length. This research laid the foundation for his postdoctoral work, which demonstrated that telomere length could be used as a predictive marker in cancer, particularly in chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL). His findings showed that CLL patients could be stratified into different survival categories based on their telomere length, even at early stages of the disease. Furthermore, telomere length was found to predict treatment responses in CLL patients.

Building on these discoveries, Dr Norris developed High-Throughput STELA (HT-STELA), a technology that provides rapid and precise telomere length measurements. HT-STELA, patented and commercialised through the Cardiff University spin-out company TeloNostiX, has revolutionised clinical diagnostics with its high capacity and quick turnaround time. The technology gained ISO17025 accreditation and is now used to diagnose telomere biology disorders (TBDs) such as dyskeratosis congenita and bone marrow failure. The success of HT-STELA has seen the

fibrosis.

doctoral scientist in Professor Duncan Baird's telomere research group at Cardiff University, has a background Oxford University. In Professor improved clinical outcomes. Baird's laboratory, Dr Liddiard has developed innovative methods to study telomere dysfunction and its genomic consequences. One of her notable achievements is designing novel molecular mechanisms to target DNA breaks to telomere-adjacent sequences, which has significantly advanced the group's research capabilities. Her work has resulted in several high-impact publications and contributed to major grant applications, including a recent Cancer Research UK funded five-year programme grant.



Above: Dr Kevin Norris (left) and Prof. Duncan Baird

TeloNostiX laboratory receive patient as far as New Zealand and Australia.

invaluable to my career development. I take great satisfaction in the fact that HT-STELA is allowing the fastest anywhere in the world and impacting their diagnosis and treatment decisions. This would not have been possible without the resources and support the WCRC have provided." Dr Norris to explore whether telomere length could provide diagnostic or prognostic information in other diseases, including additional cancer types and interstitial

samples from across the UK, Europe, and Dr Liddiard has also initiated high resolution genomics sequencing and bioinformatics pipelines to identify and characterise rare telomere-driven recombinations in cancer. This work has involved collaborations with the Wales Gene Park, as well as local, telomere testing of NHS TBD patients national and international researchers to develop sequencing methodologies for novel investigations. Her current projects involve converting genomics approaches into translational outputs to benefit cancer patients. By combining will move on to full-time employment diverse sequencing approaches, she with TeloNostiX in 2025, with an aim aims to uncover molecular signatures that can serve as cancer biomarkers, facilitating earlier diagnosis and more effective treatment stratification.

lung diseases such as pulmonary Dr Liddiard's research on the crisis state in human cells and cancer patient samples has revealed critical insights Dr Kate Liddiard, a senior post- into genomic instability and its role in cancer progression. By characterising DNA repair mechanisms and telomere interactions, she is paving the way for in cardiovascular immunology from targeted therapeutic interventions and

> Dr Liddiard said "Being part of the WCRC has provided the important opportunity to interact and work shoulder to shoulder with people embedded at each stage of patient care. This provides insights into the mechanics of oncology healthcare that will inform more relevant research questions, as well as access to patient samples, data and expertise. I firmly believe this will influence and stimulate novel research with greater translational benefit and facilitate my progression towards scientific independence."

Support for our funded researchers and **Early Career Researcher initiatives**



WCRC Researcher Networking Day 2024

together from across Wales, offering partnerships. a unique opportunity for them to showcase their work, engage in potential collaborations.

of presentations with each researcher presentation on the importance of tasked with summarising their work 'in a nutshell' followed by a lively Q&A session for deeper exploration of their research in all CReSt themes.

One of the key highlights of the event was the identification of areas where collaboration may be possible. Researchers, often working on individual projects, found common ground and complementary aspects of their work, sparking ideas for future joint projects.

provided ample time for these discussions, with many attendees An interactive session led by Dr Laura

The WCRC Researcher Networking expressing excitement over the potential Day brings WCRC-funded researchers to enhance their research through new

In addition to the researcher meaningful discussions, and explore presentations, the event also featured several notable contributions. The WCRC Patient and Public Involvement The 2024 event began with a series (PPI) team delivered an insightful involving patients and the public in research processes, emphasising how their perspectives can enrich scientific studies and outcomes.

The Wales Cancer Biobank also had a significant presence at the event. Their presentation highlighted the crucial role biobanks play in cancer research, providing invaluable resources for scientists. Attendees also learned about the biobank's latest advancements and how they can access these resources to The incorporated networking sessions bolster their own research efforts.

Thomas from Swansea University was another highlight, particularly for early career researchers (ECRs). Dr Thomas shared a number of resources and strategies aimed at supporting researchers in navigating the early stages of their careers.

A Mentimeter survey was completed during the session to assess the challenges facing ECRs in cancer research in Wales, and to determine opportunities for support through the WCRC and beyond.

Sixteen people participated in the survey, with 75% of the participants from a nonclinical background and the remaining 25% from a clinical background. The main challenges facing ECRs in Wales included obtaining funding, and job security (short term contracts, moving research groups, funding). Gaining meaningful mentorship was also highlighted as a priority for WCRC ECRs (Figure 1).

grant writing help obtaining funding funding and contracts mentorship career progression long-terms planning funding job security writing support short term contracts next steps - grant appl

Figure 1: Responses to the question 'What are the main challenges you feel that you face as an ECR?'

How can WCRC address Early Career Researcher challenges?

Dr Laura Thomas shares her thoughts:

to provide long-term funding for ECRs, the Centre can indirectly aid in long term ECR progression by providing support to navigate the identified challenges. WCRC aims to nurture and retain talent, in addition to attracting the best researchers into Wales.

This can only be achieved by providing an environment that fosters the research. Support from WCRC during the term of funding should not just be project outcome focused, but

Whilst it is outside of the remit of WCRC funding or permanent positions when should not aim to duplicate existing efforts, and further should be fully community of ECRs within WCRC. other. Meaningful support and development opportunities may include:

1. A WCRC alumni based mentoring scheme or linking in with existing development of researchers who excellent UK-wide mentoring initiatives will become future leaders in cancer (Learned society for Wales, UK ECRC, Academy of Medical Sciences) to provide unbiased support for ECR career development.



Researcher Networking Day 2024



also ensure that the researcher is in a 2. Developing a strong ECR network to competitive position to secure follow on foster a cancer research community for peer-support for ECRs within WCRC. This these opportunities arise. This support would not only provide opportunities for networking and interdisciplinary collaboration but would bring inclusive and respectful of the diverse researchers together to support each

> 3. A programme of training opportunities and frequent sign posting of pan-Wales/UK training will be essential for developing the best researchers in Wales. These training opportunities would address the identified challenges and may include: grant/paper writing, career progression planning, financial and project management. Whilst training in specific cancer-research related methods is also crucial for career development, focus should be on commonly used methods across projects (such as bioinformatics). Training should be supported by line managers and the senior management group, with an agreed number of sessions per year.

4. Providing opportunities for ECRs to sit on grant funding panels, chairing conference sessions etc.

Through these initiatives, WCRC can play a pivotal role in shaping the future of cancer research by equipping ECRs with the skills, networks, and support needed to thrive in their careers.

WCRC community building and engagement



Over the past year, the WCRC and our researchers, Dr Kevin Norris and Dr Kez with communities across Wales to raise awareness about cancer research and inspire the next generation of scientists more accessible to the public. to pursue careers in the field.

attended the annual Health and Care in Grangetown Career and Role Models Research Wales conference at Swansea Arena. Accompanied by two of our one of the most diverse areas of Cardiff researchers, Dr Namrata Rastogi and Dr and has a focus on equality, diversity, Mat Clement, we engaged with over 100 attendees through interactive activities designed to showcase the impactful research supported by the Centre. Mat Clement and Dr Kevin Norris, led This event provided a platform for engaging activities using microscopes meaningful discussions with the public to show visitors different cells and and other research centres from across explaining metastatic cancer with the Wales.

Following this, in November 2023, the WCRC team participated "Genomics whom expressed newfound interest in After Dark" at Techniquest Cardiff. This pursuing a career in cancer research. event aimed to raise public awareness

researchers have actively engaged Cleal explained their work on telomeres with the use of ropes and shoelaces, making complex scientific concepts

March was a particularly busy month for In October 2023, the WCRC team the WCRC, beginning with involvement Week. This annual event takes place in and inclusion with an aim to provide career advice and guidance to the local community. WCRC researchers, Dr use of an anatomical body. Their efforts sparked numerous thought-provoking conversations with visitors, many of

about genetics and genomics and Additionally, the WCRC participated their implications for health. The in the Cardiff School of Medicine's WCRC's interactive stand featured a "Science in Health Live!" event, where "jumping genes" activity, and two of our they engaged with over 400 Year 12



students. Through a hands-on activity of making paper viruses, students learned about adenoviruses and how they can be used to finght cancer. Researchers Dr Ashley Poon-King and Dr Kate Milward also shared insights into their career journeys, answering students' questions and providing advice and guidance. Outreach activities continued into the

spring with a visit to Swansea University by WCRC researchers Dr Mat Clement and Dr Claire Donnelly who presented to third-year undergraduate medical students about their careers and the research supported by the WCRC. The session was highly appreciated, with one attendee stating:

"As a Research Officer working on a cancer project at Swansea, attending the WCRC session provided me with a valuable opportunity to explore the ongoing research initiatives taking place within the WCRC, enabling me to expand my knowledge base and connect with peers who share similar interests. The presentations delivered during the session were excellent, and it was great to chat with the speakers about their work."

WCRC aims to raise awareness and generate interest in cancer research continues with a series of exciting activities planned for the summer and autumn. These include In2STEM work experience labs, participation in the Eisteddfod, the Minority Ethnic Communities Health Fair, and the Cross-Party Group on Medical Research event at the Senedd.





Above: Dr Mat Clement and Dr Claire Donnelly presenting to medical students at Swansea University



Above: Dr Kevin Norris explaining metastatic cancer at Grangetown Careers and Role Model

A YEAR IN THE PPI TEAM

Julie Hepburn, WCRC Lay Lead for Patient and Public Involvement, shares her thoughts on the past year



This year we felt it was time for the Research Partners to hold a half day workshop together with members of the Hub Team to review how we were meeting the PPI targets set in our Action Plan, identify which remaining ones to prioritise and start thinking about what we might want to have as PPI aims and objectives in the 2025-30 bid for Health and Care Research Wales funding.

The hybrid meeting was held in July 2023 and covered discussions on a wide range of topics as well as the opportunity to meet face to face for some of us. As a group, the Research Partners are fully embraced by the WCRC and we remain remain integral to the work and direction of the Centre.

As a result of our discussions we are now focussing on the following areas:

 Continuing to work closely with researchers through both the CReSt Themes

Keeping in the public eye about our role and achievements is key to reminding researchers of our presence, so a group of three RPs now work regularly with our Communications and Engagement Officer to produce articles for the newsletter to encourage researchers to involve us in their work. This year we have been lucky to have three opportunities to meet researchers face to face. The first was at the HCRW Conference in Swansea held in October 2023 where the PIRIT poster was highly commended and we had Research Partner representation on the WCRC Hub Team stand. The second was the WCRC Annual Conference where we were invited to give a short talk on PPI, act as judges for the poster entries, and man the PPI stand where we met several researchers throughout the day. The third was at the WCRC Researcher Networking Day where four Research Partners gave brief talks on PPI to the group and again met several researchers throughout the day. Meeting face to face is very different from the usual Teams and Zoom meetings, and meaningful researcher engagement came out of all three of these events.

Working with ECRs

We have also recognised the need to involve early-stage researchers in PPI work and in June this year we have two research partners attending a lunchtime session to talk to a sizeable group of ECRs in Swansea, helped by Laura Thomas who runs the group there and is a member of our CReSt Steering Committee. If this is successful, we will run further sessions in other areas.

 Increase focus on EDI amongst Research Partners in WCRC We share this aim with several PPI Groups in Wales and are trying to work collaboratively with them on what is a challenging target. We hope to learn from the Health and Care Research Wales Support Service Group who are currently developing good links with community groups in this area and will be presenting their work at our next RP meeting.

A recent new member of the team is Dr Pam Smith who has joined us to fill the gap left by Dr Alisha Newman, who left us after making an outstanding contribution to the group in her 4 year period as Academic Research Partner. Pam comes from a background of qualitative research and has extensive experience in EDI for PPI groups, so we look forward to her contribution in this area. As indicated, broadening our public and community reach is an active work area.

 Working towards the 2025-30 funding bid

Funding is extremely important to enable us to continue our work and the RP Team has been fully informed about the aims, objectives and structures of the bid and progress towards its completion. Public Involvement is expected throughout the delivery plans and we have been instrumental in ensuring that this is the case.



Above: L-R Alisha Newman, former WCRC Academic Lead for PPI, Bob McAlister, WCRC Lay Research Partner (PPI), Julie Hepburn, WCRC Lead Lay Research Partner, Dr Kathy Seddon, WCRC Lay Research Parner at the Wales Cancer Research Conference

WCRC PPI Research Partners engage with Early Career Researchers at Swansea University

WCRC Research Partners Sarah Peddle and Bob McAlister visited Swansea University in June 2024 to present to an audience of early career researchers (ECRs). The session was hosted by the Faculty of Medicine, Health and Life Science ECR Working Group at the Institute of Life Science.

The presentation focused on Patient and Public involvement (PPI) as practiced at the WCRC and extended to encompass the broader PPI experiences of both WCRC Research Partners. Key topics included the UK Standards for Public Involvement (UKSPI), a set of guidelines Bob McAlister helped develop as a public member. Sarah Peddle also highlighted her public contributor links to the SAIL Databank, which is based at Swansea University.

The event, organised by Dr Laura Thomas, coordinator of ECR development activities at Swansea University, responded to a need expressed by an ECR group in Swansea. Dr Thomas was pleased to welcome the Research Partners as visitors, whose insights

on the benefits of public inclusion in research were highly anticipated.

In addition to discussing the value of public involvement in research, Bob and Sarah provided attendees with resources and support options for PPI queries, including the Health and Care Research Wales Support and Delivery Centre.

The session was well-received, underscoring the WCRC Research Partners' commitment to discussing their work and the broader significance of Patient and Public Involvement in research.

Bob McAlister said: "As WCRC Research Partners we are keen to have contact with ECRs to tell them about the benefits and practicalities of public involvement so this session really suited both parties. It was great to be amongst people who are at the beginning of their inspiring research careers and find out more about the fantastic work happening across Wales"



Above: WCRC Research Partners Bob McAlister and Sarah Peddle (centre) at Swansea University with ECRs



Swansea University



Celebrating 1 year of PIRIT: transforming research through public involvement

The Public Involvement in Research These activities not only strengthened Impact Toolkit (PIRIT) is marking its one-year anniversary since its launch at the Marie Curie Conference in February 2023.

This free co-produced resource aims to help researchers working with the public to plan meaningful involvement in research alongside helping to track and demonstrate the difference it makes. Over the last year the Toolkit has not only transformed the way researchers address public involvement planning and evaluation through its pragmatic approach, but it has also become an exemplar of collaboration in the research community.

PIRIT is the result of a collaboration between the WCRC and Marie Curie Research Centre (MCRC). Co-produced with members of the public, the project is a shining example of partnership between researchers and the public. A total of twenty-seven public contributors, including four as project team members, have been actively involved in shaping PIRIT. Their involvement ranged from project scoping, tool design, content development and piloting, to dissemination and informing implementation plans.

Throughout 2023, the PIRIT team has focused on extensive engagement efforts, presenting and debating with diverse audiences through conferences, talks, workshops, and training events.

existing relationships, but also forged new ones with members of the public and professionals in the public and third sectors.

PIRIT has transcended borders, it has been downloaded over 800 times across 14 countries from Australia to the USA, demonstrating the widespread interest and active engagement of the research and public involvement communities.

Research funders and regulators, including Health and Care Research Wales, the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), and the Health Research Authority, have actively endorsed and promoted dissemination of the Toolkit, hosting PIRIT webinars and workshops, inclusion in blogs, resource pages and more. Notably, research funders Marie Curie and Health and Care Research Wales have incorporated PIRIT into their grant application guidance.

Researchers are increasingly using PIRIT to support research planning and to showcase the tangible impact of public involvement. Alisha Newman, PIRIT Implementation and Dissemination Lead explains:

"PIRIT is being used by individual PhD students and large research teams alike. Early career researchers have given positive feedback on the Planning Tool as it's helped them to frame thinking and discussions about public involvement

activity. It's also helped improve the accuracy of their grant costings, as the figures are based more closely on what the public are likely to be involved in and any support they might need. The Tracking Tool's use is also evolving, as it's being adapted by several research centres to capture the impact of public involvement on centre level decisionmaking as well as in individual studies."

Exciting developments lie ahead for PIRIT, with a paper on its development and evaluation set for publication. The roadmap also includes a dissemination and implementation plan, and seeking funding for a broader evaluation. To meet the rising demand from individuals and organisations for PIRIT demonstrations, a Toolkit tour and FAQs document will be filmed and added to the web page. Alisha Newman, PIRIT Project Lead, expresses excitement for the future:

"The success and impact of PIRIT in just one year is truly remarkable. We are thrilled to see researchers and public contributors embracing the Toolkit. As we look ahead, PIRIT's poised to continue driving public involvement planning and evaluation best practice, supporting research communities to foster meaningful partnerships with the public to deliver research that really benefits the public."

LOOKING FORWARD TO 2024-25



Above L-R: WCRC Hub members Katie Larkins, Sarah Hughes, Jenni Macdougall, Julie Hepburn, Ceri Morris and Zoe Evans supporting the Health and Care Research Wales Red4Research campaign

Research Strategy (CReSt) in 2022, we have made significant progress in rebuilding the cancer research community To support cancer researchers along in Wales, and in promoting opportunities for collaboration and learning. We look forward to continuing this work with even more focus, determination and energy in 2024-25.

We are extremely proud of the successes of our funded researchers - many of which are highlighted in this report, and many more of which we expect to be summarising in a years' time. Many of our funded researchers will transition to independent and/or sustainable institutional funding in 2025 - retaining this top academic talent and supporting our 'rising stars' in Wales to become independent researchers, is a key way in which the WCRC will continue to build a

of growing strength in Wales.

their career pathways and to build a strong integrated research network, we will continue to provide opportunities for cross-theme and cross-organisational collaboration across the cancer research community in Wales. We envisage that the Wales Cancer Research Conference will be even bigger and better next year, and we plan to extend our programme of activities to include an event dedicated to developing Early Career Researchers' careers.

I would like to thank our funded researchers for their engagement, our PPI representatives for their enthusiasm and wisdom, colleagues at Health and Care Research Wales for their support,

Since the launch of the Wales Cancer critical mass of researchers in key areas and our WCRC hub team for their hard work (not least in organising a fabulous conference) and their remarkable resilience during difficult times.

> Looking to 2025 and beyond, the WCRC have been given the opportunity to setout our vision for the next five years. Our aim will be to build on our successes to date, and grow a cohesive, sustainable cancer research community in Wales for the future. We believe that successfully establishing a robust, supported and connected research community, will lead to an increase in research opportunities and benefits for patients here in Wales.

- Prof Mererid Evans, Director



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