

CONGRESS REPORT



RESPImmun PhD Program Congress 2023

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The second annual meeting of the PhD programme Immune Modulation in Respiratory Diseases *RESPImmun* [1] took place in the Aula of the MedCampus of the Medical University of Graz.

The opening and guest speakers

The congress was opened by Elke Heinrichs who welcomed all participants on behalf of Elke Kahr, the Mayor of Graz. The opening was completed by the programme speakers Grażyna Kwapiszewska and Ákos Heinemann. Grażyna Kwapiszewska praised the efforts of all *RESPImmun* members and especially also the scientific progress that has been made by the PhD students in the first two years since the start of the programme. Ákos Heinemann then introduced the guest speakers for the retreat. Norbert F. Voelkel from Virginia Commonwealth University, a leading researcher in pulmonary and vascular physiology and pathophysiology, and Bethany Moore, Chair of the Department of Microbiology and Immunology at the University of Michigan and an expert in the pathogenesis of various forms of pulmonary fibrosis, had travelled to Graz from the USA.

Wilfried Ellmeier joined from the Medical University of Vienna. He is an expert in epigenetic and transcriptional control mechanisms that regulate T-cell development and T-cell-mediated immunity. The list of guest speakers was completed by Hana Cernecka, an expert in drug development and life sciences with a strong interest in building teams across multiple therapeutic areas and modalities. She is currently the vice president Head of Innovate Inflammation & Immunology at biotech company Evotec in Hamburg, Germany.

Figure 1: Grażyna Kwapiszewska, Ákos Heinemann and guest speakers Wilfried Ellmeier, Bethany Moore, Norbert F. Voelkel and Hanna Cernecka.



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Figure 2: The lunch break was opened by vice rector Birgit Hochenegger-Stoier from the Medical University of Graz.



The morning sessions

The opening session of the retreat was inaugurated by student speakers Gabriela Wojcik and Pamela Waked. In this session, the youngest *RESPImmun* students, namely Dušan Jeremić, Svetlana Pahernik, and Nemanja Radić, presented their doctoral projects.

The rest of the congress was then divided into four thematic sessions and each panel was introduced by one of the guest speakers.

Norbert Voelkel spoke about the origins of COPD research and its prospects. He was followed by postgraduate students Barsha Nayak, Alankrita Rani and Oleh Myronenko who presented the current state of their research in COPD.

The second panel was opened by Bethany Moore, who gave a presentation on the latest findings in the field of pulmonary fibrosis. Following her presentation, Gabriela Wojcik, Huyen Phan Thi Than, Pamela Waked and Rishi Rajesh gave insights into their latest findings.

Panel discussions about public engagement in science

After lunch, a panel discussion was held regarding the significance of public involvement in science. Medical University of Graz scientists Valentina Biasin and Simone Tischler conversed with patient advocate Claas Röhl (NF Kinder) about the advantages of including patients in fundamental research initiatives. The conclusion drawn was that science becomes more accessible when patients are directly involved in research projects. In addition, it was also argued that open innovation leads to scientific inquiries that are better aligned with the genuine requirements of patients. The round table was moderated by Geraldine Zenz from the Medical University of Graz.

Figure 3: Tejus Shinde presenting his work.



The afternoon sessions

After a coffee break, Hana Cernecka introduced the next panel. Her presentation focused on her own experience as a PhD graduate moving from academia to industry.

Following the presentation, Tejus Shinde, Sally Connolly, Katharina Schindlmaier, and Nejra Cosic shared their insights on their own PhD projects.

The congress concluded with a panel discussion on immunoregulatory responses. Wilfried Ellmeier gave a talk on recent developments in the field of immunology, followed by PhD students Ayu Syarif, Bernhard Reiter and Olaya Esparta Gonzalez presenting their PhD projects.

Best presentation awards

During the congress, the invited guest speakers were asked to vote for the three best presenters.

We would like to congratulate Bernhard Reiter (1st place) as well as Alankrita Rani and Rishi Rajesh (ex-aequo 2nd) to their great presentation!

Bernhard Reiter presented his project on “Immunoprofiling of secondary pulmonary hypertension in chronic lung diseases”, Alankrita Rani gave an insight into her work on “Investigating anti-inflammatory properties of novel apolipoprotein mimetics in lung diseases” and Rishi Rajesh described his project on “Role of succinate in pulmonary fibrosis”.

Acknowledgements

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Photo credits: Domenic Hofmann.

Reference

1. **The Doctoral Programme “Immune Modulation in Respiratory Diseases” (RESPIimmun).**
<https://www.respimmun.at/> (last accessed: 06/12/2023)



Figure 4: The RESPIimmun group.

