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The benefits and challenges of cancer trials research collaboration

Last month I had the opportunity to participate in a panel discussion at the Bio-Pharma Ambition 2018 conference on how to unlock the collaborative potential of clinical research. Our CEO, Eibhlin Mulroe, chaired the session. Among the speakers was Dr Richard Schilsky, Senior Vice President and Chief Medical Officer, American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO).

It was a very thought provoking session and an opportune time to reflect on the benefits and challenges of cancer trials research collaborations.

The first thing to say is that we do a lot of collaboration with research organisations around the world. Collaborating is a very important part of our work.

Over 30 per cent of the cancer trials that we open in Ireland are the results of collaborations with research organisations around world.

We work closely with international collaborative groups such as ECOG-ACRIN and NRG in the US, ANZUP (Australia & New Zealand), TROG, NCRN, BIG, TRIO, GEICAM — all EU groups, and the main global pharmaceutical companies.

Every year we attend international conferences not only to present our findings, but equally importantly we work hard to generate collaboration leads and opportunities to open trials that will benefit patients in Ireland.

Benefits and challenges

Collaboration brings many benefits. Not only does it bring novel and promising treatments to people with cancer, who would otherwise not avail of these treatments, it enables us to explore new ground with our colleagues around the world, develop ideas and answers we could not do in isolation and ensure that we achieve the highest levels in cancer research.

The work we are doing with our nearest neighbour in Northern Ireland to work more closely together is very exciting and hopefully will enable us to develop an all-Ireland cancer trials portfolio.

Underpinning the need for collaboration is the recognition that cancer is a global issue and finding solutions requires a global effort. We cannot mobilise a global effort without collaboration.

But collaboration requires an upfront investment. It requires time and energy. And when we are involved in collaboration we are not spending time in our clinics or laboratories, or with patients. The challenge is how do we create more time?

The National Cancer Strategy commits to creating more protected time for oncologists to enable them to devote time to cancer trials research rather than squeezing it into their demanding clinical commitments. We look forward to seeing the follow through on this as soon as possible.

Building on our experience and expertise

We have highly educated and experienced oncologists and cancer trials researchers.

Uniquely we have a national network of research units which means that our whole population can be accessed through one point of entry.

Very few countries offer this. It is the result of many years of investment by dedicated consultants and their research teams.

30 years ago our Industrial Development Authority (IDA) sold Ireland abroad as having a uniquely young and highly educated workforce. As a result of decades of very hard work by its teams around the world we have huge pharmaceutical and information technology industries. They are creating thousands of jobs and igniting many spin off industries. This did not happen by accident. It was underpinned by effective government policy and driven by very capable people.

The challenge is how do we build on our cancer trials experience and expertise, like the IDA did 30 years ago, and make Ireland a go-to place for cancer trials.

The main driver for me for growing our collaborations is the patients I meet every day in my clinic. I want to offer more options and I know increased clinical trial activity and collaborations can do exactly that.

The two challenges are how do we create more time and how do we build on our expertise and track record? We are actively seeking to address these by having our voice heard and recently met the Minister for Health, Simon Harris, to reinforce the need for cancer trials to be funded properly.