



DSSG

Spring 2024

Mentorship Report



*Together, we're finding
answers to cancer.*

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Introduction



Angela Clayton-Lea
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Following an engaging discussion at the National Training Day in January, 'Mentorship' was selected as the panel discussion theme for the Cancer Trials Ireland Spring Stakeholder Session.

The session aimed to examine how mentorship can meet the needs of and mitigate the challenges faced by young and returning researchers wanting to get involved in research and clinical trials.

Emerging from the discussion was a picture of mentorship as an enabler of collaboration, a navigational aid for those newly returned to the Irish clinical landscape, and an essential tool in breaking down silos.

The importance of inter-disciplinary and inter-speciality mentorship and the need for current mentees to become future mentors was raised. The benefits to the mentor from the experience were stressed - clearly, mentorship is fulfilling for both parties.

The Induction Pack for new and returning investigators was warmly welcomed by the audience, with many making helpful suggestions for what should be included.

We hope many of our members will consider engaging with mentorship to ensure that our new and returning investigators are welcomed into the clinical community and that Ireland can continue capitalising on our available wealth of experience.

Key points:

- ***This community values mentorship.*** The benefit and importance of mentorship, for both mentee and mentor, were clearly articulated by participants on the day.
- ***Collaboration is key.*** Mentorship can remove some of the challenges faced by young and returning investigators by creating opportunities for collaboration.
- ***Providing practical support.*** The proposed Induction Pack will enable new and returning investigators to more easily navigate the Irish Clinical Trials landscape.
- ***Getting involved.*** Consultants who are willing to provide informal mentorship to new or returning investigators are encouraged to get involved.

Mentorship: provides guidance and unlocks opportunities

Dr Grainne O’Kane, consultant medical oncologist at St James’s Hospital, Dr Lynda Corrigan, consultant medical oncologist at Tallaght University Hospital, and Angela Clayton-Lee, COO at Cancer Trials Ireland, were on the panel for this session on mentoring. Dr O’Kane chaired the panel session, which began with Dr Corrigan, who recently returned from the Royal Marsden in London, presenting young researchers’ needs and challenges.

Dr Corrigan addressed the importance of supporting and nurturing young researchers in her excellent presentation at the National Training Day in January, and this session sought to expand on some of those points and broaden the conversation around mentorship, particularly for new and returning PIs. In her opening remarks, Dr O’Kane stressed that we should consider how mentorship could be integrated across different disciplines, saying, “I was always taught the importance of mentorship and that you don’t have to have somebody within your own discipline to be your mentor. For example, my mentor was a surgeon, so we should keep that in mind as we have these conversations.”

Dr Corrigan began by emphasising the positive, reflecting that “there are plenty of opportunities in Ireland. There is room for new investigators; the market is not saturated.” There is an appetite for new clinicians, surgeons, and scientists to get involved in the research community and that spans the breadth of investigator-initiated studies, early-phase research, and later-phase studies. Dr Corrigan identified collaboration as a critical need for young investigators and something that could effectively enable new investigators to get more involved in research in Ireland.

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Dr Grainne O’Kane



Dr Lynda Corrigan, Consultant Medical Oncologist in Tallaght University Hospital.

Funding is a theme frequently raised in research discussions, and identifying and accessing funding opportunities can be particularly challenging for new or young investigators or those who have been out of Ireland for some time. Dr Corrigan noted that funding opportunities are available, but it can be challenging for a young investigator to know where to find them. More support in this regard is needed, and recent emails from Cancer Trials Ireland listing funding opportunities were welcomed.

Dr Corrigan told the audience that we’re also fortunate in our infrastructure here in Ireland. She praised local trial units for their excellent work and Cancer Trials Ireland, which plays a significant role in providing infrastructure for research in Ireland at the national level. She further noted a wealth of very experienced investigators in Ireland, who offer a lot of knowledge and experience that young investigators can tap into.

Public & patient involvement (PPI) was also discussed in this context. The significant and growing PPI community within Ireland is perceived to be of great value to young investigators. Dr Corrigan said, “It really helps to focus your research question. This is an important element that we should include at a very early stage of any project we undertake.”

Identifying some challenges, Dr Corrigan proposed that these fall broadly into the categories of time, collaboration and logistics. The biggest challenge for anybody interested in getting involved in research is time: “I have a full-time clinical post, and my priority lies with my clinical work; that must come first.” She recognised, however, the importance of carving out some specific time to become involved in research and trials.

“Many excellent physicians have returned to Ireland from overseas with much experience, and there is power in those numbers.” Ireland, despite being a small country, can capitalise on this wealth of experience and showcase itself internationally if we work together.

Dr Corrigan especially noted the importance of collaboration across different specialisms. “Having inter-speciality research groups is really important, whether at an individual hospital level or more broadly at a national level.” It was recognised that some areas are already doing this effectively and that, particularly for returning investigators, this offers a valuable starting point when arriving back in Ireland. It helps young investigators discover how to get involved in research and what opportunities exist. It also serves as a sounding board for ideas and refining research questions, which is essential in establishing successful projects.



Dr Grainne O’Kane, Consultant Medical Oncologist at Trinity St James’s Cancer Institute and Angela Clayton-Lea, COO, Cancer Trials Ireland.

The importance of maintaining international contacts when returning from overseas was noted. “These people and groups will potentially bring research and collaborative opportunities into the country because they have you as a contact.” She also stressed the importance of attending international meetings or conferences such as ESMO and using these as opportunities to maintain and strengthen existing relationships and make new connections. Mentors can also add value as they can provide introductions to new people and contacts, which are essential for growing your research career.

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Dr Lynda Corrigan

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An area where mentorship can be extremely valuable to young investigators is helping them understand the structure within Ireland and the processes involved in getting a trial up and running. Returning investigators who have been overseas may not have a robust understanding of the landscape, and this can be challenging, for example, when meeting with industry partners. Dr Corrigan recommended that making practical information available for young investigators would be helpful in this regard.

Dr O’Kane agreed that she had also found accessing this practical information challenging when she returned to Ireland. She shared that, to tackle this, Professor Michaela Higgins, President of the Irish Society for Medical Oncology, is creating an induction pack that will include a practical overview of who is involved in oncology in Ireland and the roles played by the various organisations.

Angela Clayton-Lea welcomed the introduction of this induction pack, stating that Cancer Trials Ireland is very keen to help anyone returning to Ireland navigate the landscape. She shared that another initiative that Cancer Trials Ireland is putting in place is to make it clear for new or returning investigators who the “go-to contacts” are within the CTI team. “We want to work with you, and we want to make it as easy as possible. If you have a quick query, lift the phone, and one of us within CTI can help you navigate that step of where you are.”

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Angela Clayton-Lea

Responding to Dr O’Kane’s invitation to suggest other guidance useful to new and returning investigators, Dr Scheryll Alken, consultant at Children’s Health Ireland/St James’s Hospital, commented that guidance on establishing a new post or a new service, particularly in relation to who to approach within the HSE structure, would be beneficial. Dr O’Kane agreed that this would be a valuable addition to the pack.

Prof Seamus O’Reilly offered his perspective on the value of mentorship, noting that it is lifelong and that, hopefully, the student you mentor will become a mentor for somebody else because they have experienced its value. “When people start as consultants, they’re looking for mentorship from the tribe around them, but they must continue to mentor subsequently, not just to mentor downwards but to mentor upwards as well.” He went on to note that the transfer of knowledge can flow in two ways: established departments can learn a lot from new investigators who are returning. They help reinvigorate, reimagine, and prevent staleness but also bring new skills and ways of thinking. Dr O’Kane reiterated this, observing that in her experience, it is not just the mentee who benefits; the mentor also benefits hugely and can grow lifelong with the mentee.

Dr Lynda McSorley echoed Dr Corrigan’s earlier comments on the difficulty in finding information about specific trials and

the availability of certain drugs when she first returned to Ireland after two years in Australia. “I was amazed at how siloed things can be. While people have deep expertise within their centres or regions, it can be challenging to get everyone on the same page and talking.” She reflected that this was very different from how she experienced networks operating in Australia. Dr McSorley welcomed the introduction of the pack for returning investigators and commented on how much time it would have saved her upon her return had something similar been available.

Picking up on the observation regarding feeling siloed, Dr O’Kane reflected that this had been coming up a lot at discussions and meetings over the past months and that there is a real appetite to find a way forward to break down those barriers. She suggested that returning investigators who have experienced good, collaborative approaches overseas will be crucial in making this happen.

Comments from participants online included mention of an “RCSI Early Fellows Network” designed to support early career consultant surgeons as they start their practice. Prof Debbie McNamara of RSCI, along with Ms Christina Fleming of UHL, is developing this network, which will include guidance on many of the issues covered today. Dr O’Kane welcomed this development and encouraged the information to be shared broadly so that other disciplines could be integrated.

In conclusion, Ms Clayton-Lea recalled advice given by Dr Corrigan at the National Training Day earlier in the year, which was to “say yes to as many things as possible”. She reflected that while this is admirable, we all must ensure that the supports are in place to enable people to say yes and not burn out. Dr O’Kane ended the session by reminding all consultants, both online and in the room, to contact herself or Prof Higgins if they would be interested in providing informal mentorship to a new or returning investigator.



Prof Seamus O'Reilly, Clinical lead,
Cancer Trials Ireland.



Dr Scheryll Alken, Children's Health Ireland
& St James's Hospital.



Dr Lynda McSorley,
St Vincent's Hospital Group.