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Chairman's introduction

Jean-Pierre Armand[*,1]

Department of Medical Oncology, Institut Gustave-Roussy, rue Camille Desmoulins, 94805 Villejuif, France

As physicians today, we are fortunate to benefit from rapid advances in scientific discovery. More than 50 years elapsed between Pasteur's discovery of microbes as the agents of infectious disease and Fleming's discovery of the first antibacterial agent. Today, this process is remarkably accelerated, with little if any lag between the identification of a potential target and the development of a drug directed against it. Cancer drug development in particular is entering a remarkable new phase following advances in molecular biology that have enabled new approaches to targeting cancer cells or their microenvironment. This supplement presents the proceedings of 'Bringing Discovery to Light', an official satellite symposium of the 13th European Cancer Conference (ECCO) held in Paris, on Wednesday 2 November, 2005. The purpose of the symposium was to explore some of the research being conducted at the forefront of cancer medicine and to highlight new therapies that are becoming available as a result.

Dr Maria Kavallaris considered several strategies for overcoming the clinical problem of resistance to antimicrotubule cytotoxics, which remain among the most clinically important anticancer therapies. These include the development of new tubulin-binding agents, such as the epothilone analogues, which are proving effective against taxane-resistant tumours, as well as investigating how changes in microtubule stability might be exploited to improve treatment response, and how antimicrotubule drug resistance might potentially be overcome by gene silencing or small molecule approaches that target specific regulators of microtubule function.

Professor Karol Sikora provided a panoramic view of the increasing importance of immunology in advancing cancer medicine, both as a tool in drug development and diagnostics, and as the basis for new targeted therapies and specific immunotherapy. He considered how immunology in its broad sense might help to overcome some of the challenges involved in realising the huge promise of new anticancer therapies within the constraints of modern healthcare provision.

In recent years substantial advances have been made in understanding the fundamental biology of tumorigenesis, resulting in a number of new targets for small molecule inhibitors. Professor Juan Carlos Lacal reviewed the rationale for targeting the tyrosine kinases, the development of the tyrosine kinase inhibitors, and some of the clinical evidence for the efficacy of these drugs in the management of cancer.

Professor Lacal sounded an optimistic note for the future of cancer management by suggesting that it is only a matter of time before all cancers can be treated effectively. Certainly on the evidence of the information presented here, cautious optimism appears justified, while much of course remains to be achieved.

* Tel.: +33 1 42 11 43 46; fax: +33 1 42 11 52 17.
E-mail address: armand@igr.fr
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