Conference on familial breast and ovarian cancer – research and clinical practice

“Familial Cancer – Research and Practice” - Brisbane, 16-19 August

Daniele Generali, Nicola Sasanelli

The international conference on “Familial Cancer – Research and Practice” was held in Brisbane (Australia) from 16th to 19th August. The conference was co-funded by the Office of the Scientific Attaché of this Embassy and organised by the Kathleen Cuningham Foundation Consortium for Research into Familial Breast Cancer (KconFab), the Australian Ovarian Cancer Study (AOCS) and Griffith University of Brisbane, in collaboration with the Australian Ministry of Science and the Queensland Government. About 160 researchers, 3 of whom from Italy, took part in the conference. The Italian delegation was composed of Dr. Paolo Radice (responsible for the operational unit “cancer genetic susceptibility”, Department of Experimental Oncology - National Cancer Institute of Milan), Prof. Maurizio Genuardi (Faculty of Medicine - Department of Clinical Physiopathology - University of Florence) and Dr. Daniele Generali (Centre for Anatomopathological Study of the Breast - Cremona).

As is normal practice of this Embassy, Italian researchers and researchers of Italian origin working in Australian universities or research centres, such as the Queensland University (Dr. Chanel Smart, of Calabrian origin), the Griffith University (Dr. Derek Kennedy and Dr. Giovanna Di Trapani) and the University of Sydney (Dr. Anna DeFazio and Dr. Natalie Gava), were also invited. Queensland-ARIA Association (Association for Research between Italy and Australia) organised a welcoming event for all the researchers coming from Italy.

Breast cancer is ranked second among the causes of female cancer deaths in the world. The World Health Organisation recently declared it an epidemic disease. One out of seven women develop breast cancer during their life (2003 statistical data), and figures are rapidly increasing. In 2003, breast cancer affected approximately 1 million people in the world and killed 400,000 people. In Australia, approximately 11,000 new cases are detected every year and deaths from cancer amount to 4,000. In 2004, breast cancer accounted for 27.4% (130,000 women) of female cancer deaths in Italy.

Over the last ten years, joint clinical research activities and translational activities – that is studies aimed at identifying new genes or genetic mechanisms which cause cancer - have been carried out by the two countries, in particular between the Breast Pathology Unit (Cremona) and Melbourne University; the University of Florence, Murdoch Research Institute (Melbourne) and the Royal Melbourne Institute; Griffith University (Brisbane) and “San Raffaele” Hospital (Milan).

The main objective of the Brisbane conference was to spur the exchange of experiences between researchers from the two countries on the state of research on breast and ovarian cancer. Debates focused on methylation studies (mutations of genetic activity), genetic mutations studies “Breast Cancer 1 and 2” (BRCA1 BRCA2), fundamental to better understand breast and ovarian cancer, and genetic blueprint and protein studies involved in the resistance to anti-cancer drugs.

Contributions from Italian researchers have been highly appreciated. A lively debate on different issues followed and a number of Australian research centres showed their interest by collaborating in projects where the Italian presence plays a leading role. In particular, following the Brisbane conference and numerous meetings between Italian and Australian researchers, a strategy for a bilateral cooperation was planned, based on the following actions:

1- The Breast Pathology Unit (Cremona) and the University of Melbourne agreed on a research project on epidemiologic-molecular research to detect new pointers for early diagnosis of breast cancer. The project envisages a clinical and radiological study on 10,000 women carried out by the Breast Pathology Centre. DNA samples will be collected through a blood test and then sent to the research centres of the University of Melbourne, to test specific genes to detect breast cancer at early stages. Results will help identify a new laboratory approach to routine practice;

2- The Department of Experimental Oncology of the National Cancer Institute of Milan has joined the international Consortium of Investigators of Modifier of BRCA1 and BRCA2 (CIMBA), coordinated by Australian researchers. The two institutes agreed to share epidemiologic-clinical and molecular data which will enable them to rely on more pieces of information, more rapidly available and more reliable, since they will be based on broader case studies;
3- The Department of Experimental Oncology of the Cancer Institute of Milan and the Queensland Institute for Medical Research of Brisbane intend to study the possibility of exchanging both researchers and new technologies between the two centres. The target is to increase the number of samples and relevant results available to make the method identified more valid, reliable and available to both research centres;

4- The Department of Physiopathology of the University of Florence intends to conclude an agreement between the Australian Kathleen Cuningham Foundation Consortium for Research into Familial Breast Cancer and the Italian Association for Familial Gastrointestinal Cancer (AIFEG). Experiences and data will be shared to improve knowledge on the pathologies of familial cancer;

5- The Department of Physiopathology of the University of Florence, Griffith University of Brisbane and the Royal Melbourne Hospital are collaborating in research projects on intestinal familial cancers. Short researcher exchanges will be encouraged, and clinical and molecular data as well as analytical laboratory methods will be shared.

6- The Breast Pathology Unit of Cremona, together with the University of Melbourne, will organise an international symposium from 30th September to 2nd October 2007 entitled “New strategies on neoadjuvant therapy of breast carcinoma”. The results of recent clinical-translational studies on breast cancer will be presented at the conference. Furthermore, a workshop aimed at checking the abovementioned bilateral initiatives started during the Brisbane conference will be organised, as agreed by the Italian researchers who participated in the Brisbane conference and their Australian counterparts.

In conclusion, the Brisbane conference not only ensured a fruitful exchange of experiences between the two scientific communities on breast and ovarian cancer, but also offered the opportunity to plan interesting and on-going initiatives, fostering deeper bilateral cooperation in this field of research.

Original manuscript in Italian

*Dott. Daniele Generali*
Unità di Patologia Mammaria
Senology and Breast Cancer Unit
Breast Research Laboratory
Istituti Ospitalieri di Cremona
Viale Concordia 1
26100 Cremona (Italy)
T +390372408042
E daniele.generali@gmail.com

*Dott. Nicola Sasanelli*
Scientific Attache’, Embassy of Italy
Canberra