

American College of Rheumatology (ACR) 2018

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Last week I visited the American College of Rheumatology (ACR) congress in Chicago for the first time. The ACR is the biggest annual rheumatology congress, therefore it was an excellent opportunity for me to present my work there. The focus of my PhD project is on the humoral autoimmune system in ANCA-associated vasculitis (AAV) and systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE). To investigate this, I study the role of NETs (neutrophil extracellular traps), autoreactive B cells and autoantibodies in these autoimmune diseases. It is a challenging project situated on the bridge between patients and the lab in which I am both pursuing a role as medical doctor and as biomedical scientist doing the laboratory experiments. This year I submitted two abstracts for the ACR, which were about: I) the role of NETs in AAV and SLE and II) the effect of B cell targeted therapies (Rituximab, Belimumab and Bortezomib) on autoantibodies and NET formation in SLE patients. Both abstracts got accepted as an oral presentation and I had to present these project on Tuesday 23 October during the congress. Secondly, we also scheduled a consortium meeting with our FOREUM collaborators on Monday 22 October to discuss our project and future plans. Besides my presentations and the FOREUM consortium meeting, my goal of attending the congress was to learn about the latest developments in my research field and talk with different researchers. I will now further discuss some of the highlights of this congress in detail.

On Tuesday I had to present my two abstracts, The first session was called “B cell biology & targets in autoimmune and inflammatory diseases”, where I had to present abstract II. This presentation went very well, afterwards I received many comments and questions that really will help in our future research. After this session, I had to present abstract I, in the “Innate Immunity” session. My presentation went well, however there were less attendees probably because this session was very late in the afternoon unfortunately. Still, there were some good comments and questions afterwards.

On Monday, we held our half-yearly FOREUM meeting with our collaborators from London and Freiburg. We discussed the data, covered by abstract II, and talked about new plans for the coming months. Also, we discussed my visit to Freiburg for a few days end of this year to collect some of the patient samples and to learn a NET degradation assay.

During the whole congress I attended a lot of different session mostly about AAV or SLE. The most interesting sessions for me were “Immunology Update: Next generation of B cell and plasma cell therapies” and “the Calibrate study”. In the B cell session, I learned that a specific B cell subset, CD11c+ cells are specifically present in autoimmune diseases. We are also going to study this subset in our experiments now. I also really enjoyed the poster sessions, because I have seen many interesting posters on NETs.

Altogether, the ACR 2018 was a great success. I learned a lot and I hope that the presentation of my research reached a lot of different people. Thank you for the financial support that made this all possible!