7th Symposium of the Swiss Clinical Trial Organisation

Building up the future generation of clinical researchers

Report of the Symposium
The annual symposium of the Swiss Clinical Trial Organisation (SCTO) was held on 16 June 2016 in Lausanne, this time in collaboration with the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH) and the Lausanne University Hospital (CHUV). 130 participants gained insight into the current opportunities and challenges to promote young physicians in the field of clinical research in Switzerland. After a glance abroad, showing outstanding examples of successful careers in clinical research in the US and UK, Swiss clinical researchers presented local success stories. The event concluded with an overview of the authorities’ visions and concrete plans for the future to build up the new generation of clinical researchers in Switzerland.

Furthermore, clinical researchers within a Swiss institution performing or coordinating investigator initiated trials (IITs) presented their projects during a poster session. At the end of the symposium, the three best projects and posters were awarded prizes.

Keynote lecture – successful career in clinical trial research
Marc Alan Pfeffer, Dzau Professor of the Harvard Medical School, spoke in his lively talk about his career, his basic research on the rat’s heart, which led him step by step to the clinical discovery of angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors (ACEIs). ACEIs mitigate adverse ventricular remodelling following myocardial infarction, resulting in increased survival and other clinical benefits – a breakthrough in cardiovascular medicine.

Prof. Pfeffer highlighted the most important success factors: strong collaborators and mentors, prior knowledge and past experiences and a sound education and dedication. Prof. Pfeffer summarised this by quoting Claude Bernard: “Art is ‘I’, science is ‘we’”.

The Swiss environment
Local initiatives at Swiss university hospitals aim to create an environment to support young physicians in their clinical research career. Three universities/university hospitals presented their strategies and initiatives.

Jerôme Pugin, Professor and Vice-Dean in charge of clinical medicine in Geneva and Director of the Clinical Trial Unit Geneva, Mirjam Christ-Crain, Professor and Co-Head of the Department Clinical Research at the University Hospital Basel, and Gabriela Senti, Professor and Director Research and Education and Head of the Clinical Trials Center at the University Hospital Zurich presented the different opportunities offered for medical students and medical doctors to advance a career in clinical research and clinical sciences within their institutions.

Medical Faculties together with University Hospitals use various means and measures to identify, motivate, promote and support research-oriented students and medical doctors. Concerning the possibility to do an MD-PhD in clinical research, Basel and Zurich established new PhD-programmes with a special focus on clinical science, while Geneva extended the existing MD-PhD programme for candidates with clinical research projects. Two “systematic” approaches seem to be of importance: the actual offer of high quality theoretical and practical courses in the field of clinical research, as well as structures that allow and support an effective combination of clinical research and daily clinical routine. In addition, candidates need scientific ambition, self-initiative and a good mentor to be successful. All presenters agree that a structured programme with protected research time, as targeted in the roadmap presented later in this meeting, would be most helpful to make the clinical research career more attractive.

Keynote lecture – successful career in observational clinical research
Nick Wareham, Professor of the University of Cambridge, Medical Research Council Epidemiology Unit, agreed with the statement made by Prof. Pfeffer: key for a successful career is a good mentor. Prof. Wareham pointed out that he had no straightforward career from medical school directly to Cambridge professorship. After studies and employment in the US, he joined the University of Cambridge, where he became a Wellcome Trust Senior Fellow in Clinical Science. Wareham’s research is based on basic aetiological findings of obesity and diabetes, and he translated the epidemiological understanding into preventive action. He closed his speech by saying: “Developing the right question is the hardest part of each research project”.

Selected success stories of clinical researchers in Switzerland
The Swiss researchers are in principal no different from the foreign previous speakers. Leading representatives of today’s Swiss clinical researchers presented their career from the medical school to their successful position of today.

Prof. Marco Valgimigli, Associate Professor Cardiology and Senior Interventional Cardiologist, Inselspital Universitäts- spital Bern, Prof. Christoph Driessen, Head Clinical Trials Unit, Kantonsspital St. Gallen and PD Dr Grégoire Wuerzner, Head Clinical Projects, Nephrology Department CHUV, presented highlights of their successful clinical research careers. Although active in different fields of research, they came to the same conclusion that one needs good colleagues, a strong network and the right mentor. All speakers agreed with their previous speakers that beside strong education and mentors luck is as well an important factor for success. In addition, specific programmes at the universities and dedicated research time are vital for the ideal career path.
Keynote lecture: Pharma Industry – Drugs and Man

In the pharmaceutical industry, clinical research is the key instrument for research and development of new drugs. Jean-Paul Clozel, Professor, CEO, member of the board and founder of Actelion, looks back on a sound education in medicine and profound knowledge of his research field. After working as practising cardiologist for 11 years, he joined the pharmaceutical industry. His credo and key success factor besides the already mentioned environment of colleagues and mentors is quality: elaborating a thorough clinical programme, performing high quality clinical studies, asking the right questions and generating robust clinical data. Equally important is to dedicate oneself to a field of research, to persevere an aim with spirit, to persist, and, last but not least, fun.

Prof. Clozel also takes the view to not mix up the different tasks of academia and the pharmaceutical industry. The broad research in academia and the industry’s development of new drugs are different tasks but go hand in hand for the benefit of patients and society.

Roundtable: A national roadmap to support clinical researchers

In 2013 the Federal Council issued a masterplan to strengthen biomedical research and technology in Switzerland, including a mandate for the platform “Future of Medical Education”. Subsequently, in 2014 the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH) and the Swiss Academy of Medical Sciences (SAMS) issued recommendations about how to promote clinical research. Thus, in 2015 a task force has been assigned to draft a roadmap for the implementation of those recommendations. The “roadmap 2016-2021 for building up the future generation of clinical researchers” is now in public consultation until the end of June 2016, and thereafter its implementation will start. Important to note is that all stakeholders agree that not only well-educated medical doctors are needed for high-quality clinical research. It is an interdisciplinary field necessitating different expertise. Although the scope for this roadmap is medical education, other professionals should be considered in future as well.

Representatives of the different stakeholders including the SAMS, the SCTO, the FOPH, the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI), the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), the pharmaceutical industry, and the faculties of medicine and university hospitals discussed the need, risks and challenges of this roadmap and answered questions from the audience.

Altogether for successful clinical research different competences and specialisations are needed: brilliant scientists with bright ideas formulating the right questions as well as clinicians who implement clinical trials and help to find answers by generating high-quality data and respect the ethical framework. Therefore, modular and specific training offers are required, which the target audience should be familiar with. Furthermore, funding programmes or starter grants for physicians in clinical research must be available. Young researchers are facing difficulties to get funded as long as they do not have a substantial track record. Long-term research-friendly conditions and career opportunities must be provided and advertised in an early phase of education to make clinical research an attractive option. The roadmap is setting the necessary priorities along the career path and overall, the attendees agreed that this roadmap, once implemented, will help to boost clinical research in Switzerland.

Presentation of awards to the best posters

Based on the evaluation of the scientific committee, we are pleased to present the following winners:

The 1st prize was given to Dr Daria Solari from CHUV for her poster “Hypertonic lactate to improve cerebral metabolism and brain perfusion in critically III patients with hemorrhagic stroke: a phase-II interventional trial”.

The 2nd prize received Dr Alexander Kutz from Kantonsspital Aarau for his poster “The association of admission hyperglycemia and adverse clinical outcome in medical emergency patients depends on diabetic status – results from the multi-national, prospective, observational TRIAGE study”.

The 3rd prize was given to Dr Marcus Mumme from University Hospital Basel for his poster “Nasal chondrocytes for articular cartilage repair: a phase 1 ‘first-in-human’ clinical trial”.

The SCTO congratulates the winners for their excellent work! We thank all applicants and wish them a lot of success in their future endeavours.
About the SCTO

New and better therapies through research

The Swiss Clinical Trial Organisation (SCTO) is the central cooperation platform for patient-oriented clinical research in Switzerland. Its primary objective is to attractively and competitively position Swiss clinical research in the international competition with respect to innovation and quality.

The SCTO intends to achieve this mandate by:

- Promoting a high-quality and nationally harmonised study culture – including the continuing education necessary for this purpose
- Supporting the formation of a national network
- Facilitating the integration of national clinical research into international networks
- Promoting the transfer of knowledge between basic research and therapeutic applications
- Building bridges between academia, industry and public authorities, as well as trade organisations and professional associations
- Advocating favourable conditions in the field of clinical research in general

For further information see www.scto.ch

The SCTO is a joint initiative of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and the Swiss Academy of Medical Sciences (SAMS). Since 1 January 2013, the SCTO acts as an independent organisation.

Save the date: 1 June 2017

8th Symposium of the Swiss Clinical Trial Organisation (SCTO) in collaboration with the University Hospital Basel.