

Major New Research Scholarships: “Advances in Psoriasis”

Interview with Professor Knud Kragballe from the Department of Dermatology and Venereology, Aarhus Hospital, Denmark

Professor Knud Kragballe is a member of the adjudication committee for the project “Advances in Psoriasis”, a series of research scholarships instituted by the pharmaceutical company Wyeth. The sum total of the six new research scholarships is approximately DKK 4.5 million. These grants are provided in order to encourage and support pioneering research that may provide a greater understanding of psoriasis and closely related illnesses. The independent international adjudication committee is tasked with selecting innovative research projects focusing, in particular, on the inflammatory process of psoriasis and tumour necrosis factor (TNF)-related skin disorders. The deadline for grant applications is 29 February 2008.

Important funds for an under-prioritized field of research

The new research scholarships are for a severely under-prioritized field of research. Knud Kragballe is particularly pleased about the grants, because they make major research projects possible. He states: It’s generally difficult raising money for dermatological research. As a discipline, we find ourselves in competition with larger specialisms, and it’s been that way for decades. In the field of dermatology, there aren’t that many foundations, and nothing like on the same scale as for cancer and cardiac research.

Dermatology has undergone revolutionary progress in the last few decades, but there is a general lack of research funding, particularly for psoriasis, as Knud Kragballe explains: There’s a lack of research funding generally. For instance, there’s only the Psoriasis Research Foundation in Denmark at present. The Foundation is important and does provide funding, but this far from meets the national requirement. With the grants just set up by Wyeth, researchers will be able to initiate far more complicated and larger projects. These grants are a unique opportunity for dermatologists wishing to conduct research.

Many unknown factors in psoriasis

Although psoriasis is by no means a new disease, it has many unexplained aspects. Knud Kragballe anticipates research being carried out into the mechanisms of the illness, the various patient groups, and their response to treatment, as he explains: I expect TNF-alpha and the immune system to become the central focal points of a number of applications. The research will be linked

to the disease mechanisms in general and, more specifically, to obtaining greater knowledge about basic disease mechanisms. That’s also why I am expecting to see applications centring around laboratory-based research. Another big unresolved issue in psoriasis research is which types of patient respond to which treatments. It would be pioneering if we were able to identify the optimum match between patient and treatment in advance.

He continues: After all, we don’t know the actual cause of psoriasis. We do know that hereditary factors play a big part, but we don’t know the basics. That also means that the treatment we now have suppresses psoriasis but does not cure it. The biological drugs are yielding really good results, and that’s something worth continuing to build on.

Co-morbidity is another hot topic for which the professor is expecting applications. He does not feel that we know enough about co-morbidity and the effect of treatment on co-morbidity, or the effect of early treatment in relation to co-morbidity.

Long road to elucidating the cause

A question that preoccupies many people is whether the cause of psoriasis will be found in the years immediately ahead. Knud Kragballe appreciates the developments of recent years, but thinks there is still a long way to go: We’re more genned-up on mechanisms, but further away from any explanation of the cause as such. We surmise that hereditary factors play an essential role, but it’s much harder to decode than had been imagined. It’s a complex area, and one that will take time to unravel... . The new therapeutic options and breakthroughs such as biologics have resulted in a greater interest in the illness generally and in the research. There’s a much greater focus today than 5 or 10 years ago. Treatment and research go hand in hand.

Competition between able researchers

Wyeth has no influence over who is allocated the research funding. An independent international panel of acclaimed dermatologists has been set up to decide which projects are to be allocated research funds. Knud Kragballe finds it positive that the grants have been collected into a single large international pool:

That creates international competition, and may be instrumental in highlighting those countries and research teams that are really “with it” in terms of leading the research into psoriasis. It can also provide a picture of how good Nordic research is in comparison with the research being done in other countries.

Further information about the grants and application forms is available at: www.advancesinpsoriasis.com. As stated above, the deadline for applications is 29 February 2008.