

GSCN Travel Award Report

18th European Summer School on Stem Cell Biology and Regenerative Medicine 2025, Spetses, Greece

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Thanks to the generous support of the GSCN, I was able to attend the 18th European Summer School on Stem Cell Biology and Regenerative Medicine on the island of Spetses in September 2025. For one week, leading experts and around fifty early-career researchers from across the globe came together to share ideas, present research, and engage in lively scientific discussions.

The program opened with a central question: *what actually defines a stem cell?* – a deceptively simple question that resurfaced repeatedly throughout the week and on which even the experts did not always agree. This spirit of open debate characterized the entire summer school.

The scientific program covered a wide range of topics in stem cell research, presented by an outstanding faculty including Kim Jensen, Sally Lowell, Austin Smith, James Briscoe, Michele De Luca, Jim Wells, Matthias Lutolf, and Alejo Rodriguez-Fraticelli. Among the many excellent talks, I was particularly fascinated by Alejo Rodriguez-Fraticelli's lecture on lineage tracing in hematopoiesis, which provided compelling evidence that fate choices may occur much earlier than previously thought. Another highlight was Matthias Lutolf's presentation on bioengineering approaches and the possibilities offered by organoid models, especially regarding how tissue-tissue interactions can be studied in increasingly sophisticated systems.

Beyond the purely scientific lectures, the program was enriched by Anna Couturier's inspiring sessions on science communication and the role of stem cells in public discourse, as well as panel discussions on topics such as publishing strategies and disease modeling. These complementary perspectives broadened our understanding of the societal and translational context of stem cell research.

In addition to the lectures, the small group discussions offered the invaluable opportunity to engage directly with the invited speakers. I particularly appreciated the chance to speak with Alejo Rodriguez-Fraticelli, Jim Wells, and Emma Rawlins in this setting. These sessions allowed us to go beyond science, touching on career perspectives, publication strategies, and the personal challenges of academic life.

Every evening, poster sessions were held at the beach. Each participant first introduced themselves and their project with a short teaser talk in front of the whole audience and later gave a two-minute summary to a jury. This format was not only a great exercise in concise science communication but also encouraged lively discussions and constructive feedback. Presenting my own project in this setting gave me important input for the further development of my work and opened opportunities for new collaborations.

Scientifically, I greatly valued the interactions with Emma Rawlins, whose expertise in lung organoids aligns closely with my own research focus. She was open to the idea of giving a talk in a seminar series that we, as clinician scientists within the TITUS program at MHH, organize ourselves – something that would be an excellent opportunity for our community. Meeting Jim Wells was equally rewarding: he got me in contact with colleagues at the Cincinnati Children's Hospital who, like myself, work on tissue-resident macrophages, and also connected me with members of his lab. These discussions provided invaluable advice for my ongoing project.

Equally enriching were the many connections I made with my peers. I was able to establish networks with fellow PhD students and young postdocs from Germany, the UK, and other European countries, as well as overseas from Canada and Australia. We are committed to staying in touch and meeting again at future conferences, hopefully as soon as next year's ISSCR meeting.

Despite the packed agenda, there was always time to connect with peers outside the sessions, explore the island, and enjoy the sea. A particularly memorable highlight was the Spetses Armata Festival, with its burning flagship on the water and the spectacular fireworks – a truly unforgettable evening.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Jenny Nelder, who organized the summer school with great dedication and was a wonderful point of contact throughout.

Attending the 18th European Summer School on Stem Cell Biology and Regenerative Medicine was both scientifically enriching and personally inspiring. I am sincerely grateful to the GSCN for making my participation possible, as it not only advanced my knowledge but also strengthened my professional network and opened new perspectives for my career.

Sincerely,
Theresa Nägler