

GSCN Travel award report: European Stem cell Summer School on Regenerative Medicine in Spetses, Greece on 13th – 20th September 2024

In September 2024, I had the privilege of attending the European Stem Cell Summer School on Regenerative Medicine, held on the picturesque island of Spetses, Greece. Set against the stunning backdrop of the Mediterranean Sea, the event not only featured a beautiful location but also inspiring lecturers and amazing delegates.

The summer school brought together around 50 participants for a week-long program. We kicked off with a welcome dinner and drinks at the hotel, where we had the chance to get to know each other. Throughout the week, we attended excellent lectures by principal investigators from various stem cell fields. Agnete Kirkeby opened the summer school with an insightful talk on the potential of stem cells. She generously shared her journey, including the challenges she faced in developing a stem cell-based treatment for Parkinson's disease and advancing her product to clinical trials. Austin Smith took us through the history of discovering mouse and human embryonic stem cells, as well as induced pluripotent stem cells. This was followed by Sara Wickström's fascinating lecture on how external physical factors influence stem cells and affect their differentiation capacity. We also gained fresh perspectives from Kim Jensen's research on his favorite organ, the intestine and his novel work on potential treatments for ulcerative colitis. Elena Cattaneo guided us through the origin and evolution of the huntingtin gene, explaining how its CAG repeats are linked to Huntington's disease (HD), a neurodegenerative disorder. She highlighted that tracing the gene through evolutionary history revealed a gradual increase in CAG repeats, and that a higher count of these repeats leads to an earlier onset of HD symptoms. While I wish I could highlight all the incredible speakers, space limits me to just a few. The PhD students and PostDocs also had the chance to present their own research with poster sessions held in the evening by the beach. Here, we could gather valuable feedback from the faculty but also exchange ideas and connect with fellow delegates while enjoying delicious Greek food. In addition to scientific lectures, Elena Cattaneo and Anna Couturier gave lectures on the importance for scientists to communicate their research to the public, keeping in mind the broader societal impact of scientific advancements. We brainstormed ideas to enhance our communication skills and increase our involvement in public engagement programs.

One of the most enriching aspects of the summer school was to join small discussion groups (up to 12 participants) with each principal investigator. This gave us the opportunity to ask in-depth scientific questions as well as discuss career paths and the personal challenges we face in academia.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed my time at the summer school. It was an excellent occasion to network with fellow stem cell scientists, explore potential collaborations, and perhaps even form lasting friendships. I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to attend this event, made possible by the generous support of the GSCN.

Sincerely,
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