

Cancer Trials Ireland welcomes appointment of Professor Grainne O’Kane as the Pat Smullen Chair in Pancreatic Cancer at University College Dublin

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Cancer Trials Ireland, the national organisation dedicated to advancing cancer clinical trials, warmly welcomes the appointment of Professor Grainne O’Kane as the inaugural *Pat Smullen Chair in Pancreatic Cancer at University College Dublin (UCD)*.

The new position will anchor expertise in pancreatic research in Ireland, with the ambition of creating a global centre of excellence for the treatment and research of this form of cancer, which has one of the poorest outcomes.

The role will allow Professor O’Kane to divide her time between clinical work as a treating physician at St Vincent’s University Hospital (the national surgical centre for pancreatic cancer) and research work at UCD School of Medicine, where she will work to identify, attract, and open new pancreatic cancer trials, train the next generation of specialists in pancreatic cancer, and work to integrate care for pancreatic patients on the island of Ireland.

Professor Grainne O’Kane said:

“A diagnosis of pancreatic cancer can be quite devastating as its one of the most difficult cancers to treat, however we are learning more and more every day. Research has contributed to this. This cancer has also come with two big challenges beyond science and medicine: People are not as aware of pancreatic cancer, compared to other cancers and despite being one of the most lethal cancers, it does not receive the same funding or attention as other cancers.”

“Frances Crowley and her family, and friends, and the horse racing community in Ireland have done a staggering amount to change this in Ireland. They put pancreatic cancer on the map, and in the past five years, raised more than €3m to research the disease and I am here today, in this role, because of that. I am honoured and humbled to receive this opportunity, and I’m very excited about the future.”

The position will receive €900,000 (€180,000 per annum) in funding over five years from Cancer Trials Ireland's *Pat Smullen Pancreatic Cancer Fund* with matching funding for the role from the HSE National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP). UCD will then take over Cancer Trials Ireland funding contribution to continue the partnership with the HSE NCCP.

Angela Clayton-Lea, COO of Cancer Trials Ireland said:

“Sadly, Pat Smullen died in September 2020, but his legacy lives on and the fund he created includes new treatment options for 174 patients with pancreatic cancer, at no cost to themselves, or to the State. Professor O’Kane, in her capacity as the *Pat Smullen Chair in UCD*, will help to further develop the research infrastructure in place in hospitals, meaning we will be better able to support the development of pancreatic cancer clinical trials in general, and be ready to take full advantage of important treatment advances which may give rise to further research opportunities for pancreatic cancer.”

Speaking about the appointment, Frances Crowley, wife of the late Pat Smullen said:

“By funding this role, the aim is to put pancreatic cancer research onto a more stable and promising footing, and I know that’s what Pat wanted to achieve when we set about the Irish Champions Weekend fundraiser in 2019. Thanks to the unswerving support of the horse racing community, Pat’s friends, and many others whose lives have been affected by pancreatic cancer, we are able to make this long-term funding commitment.”

New developments

Frances Crowley is also a member of the *Pat Smullen Pancreatic Cancer Fund* in Cancer Trials Ireland, which oversees how funds are used. Earlier this year, that committee approved €100,000 to support the rollout of a surveillance programme for people with a genetic disposition to pancreatic cancer.

Global developments in pancreatic research are also promising, as **Professor Ray McDermott, Vice Clinical Lead for Cancer Trials Ireland explains:**

“It’s a very exciting time for pancreatic research. There is a gene mutation that is present in 90% of pancreatic tumours, and for many years our efforts to target this mutation haven’t worked – but that’s starting to change. With the *Pat Smullen Chair in Pancreatic Cancer* now in place, Ireland is in a strong position to attract trials using new agents that better target this mutation. Hopefully we will see patients benefitting from these trials soon.”

Meanwhile, Dean and Head of UCD School of Medicine, Professor Michael Keane said:

“The hosting of the Pat Smullen Chair in Pancreatic Cancer at UCD School of Medicine is consistent with UCD’s strategic priority to be a research-intensive university. This new position, will see the development and implementation of robust and innovative research programmes in pancreatic cancer. With teaching hours included as part of the role, the appointee will contribute to the academic development of the 3,300 undergraduate and postgraduate students at UCD School of Medicine. The position is an excellent opportunity for Professor O’Kane to drive research and teaching activities in an ambitious academic environment.

“I want to take this opportunity to share UCD School of Medicine’s gratitude with Cancer Trials Ireland and the Smullen family for their philanthropic support for the establishment of this new chair. It is thanks to support like theirs that cancer research and teaching continues to advance, improving our knowledge of the disease, its diagnosis, therapeutic manipulation, and, ultimately, patient outcomes.”

Challenging to Treat

According to the Irish Cancer Society, over 600 people are diagnosed with pancreatic cancer each year in Ireland. Unfortunately, the disease is biologically complex and challenging to treat and study. The tumour microenvironment in pancreatic cancer creates a particularly hostile barrier that shields the tumour, making it challenging for treatments to reach and effectively target cancer cells.

In addition, pancreatic cancer has one of the highest mortality rates among cancers. Its rapid progression and aggressive nature mean that the disease is often detected at an

advanced stage, leaving limited options for effective treatment. This poor prognosis can result in lower levels of public attention and funding in comparison with other cancers.

Research funded by the Pat Smullen Pancreatic Cancer Fund so far:

- 15 patients were recruited to a, now closed, Paricalcitol trial that explored enhancing chemotherapy effectiveness in people with advanced pancreatic cancer.
- 11 patients from an overall target of 22 have been recruited to a trial for patients with advanced stage pancreatic cancer that have failed treatment.
- A radiotherapy study has opened to investigate if a novel radiation delivery technique can improve outcomes in patients with operable/borderline-operable pancreatic cancer. 3 patients have been accrued to date of a potential 67.
- A study has opened offering a carefully designed nutrition and exercise that aims to prevent muscle loss and improve people's resilience and recovery from pancreas tumour surgery. It will recruit up to 70 patients.
- €100,000 was donated to St Vincent's Hospital to help fund a Next Generation Sequencing (NGS) machine, which can sequence the full genetic code of a pancreatic cancer tumour. Installing the new NGS machine enabled the hospital to advertise two new consultant positions, and to submit a €500,000 business plan to the National Cancer Control Programme.

For more information on the work of Cancer Trials Ireland, visit www.cancertrials.ie, and on the Pat Smullen Pancreatic Cancer Fund, visit www.cancertrials.ie/pat-smullen

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About Cancer Trials Ireland

Cancer Trials Ireland is a registered charity and the leading cancer research trials organisation in Ireland. It aims to provide every patient with cancer access to high-quality and potentially life-altering cancer trials and to make Ireland a highly attractive location to open cancer trials.

In 2022, a survey of public attitudes revealed three in five people in Ireland would take part in a clinical trial. Almost all cancer clinical trials available in Ireland are listed on the Cancer Trials Ireland website: www.cancertrials.ie/open-trials.

Cancer Trials Ireland is partly funded by the Health Research Board and the Irish Cancer Society. It also receives income from pharmaceutical companies and international research groups, as well as through philanthropic giving and donations from members of the public.