simply blood
Deconstructing Blood Cell Research
Building the Hematology Community

Lab Spotlight: Helgason Lab

- April 13, 2023

Lab Spotlight Vignir Helgason, School of Cancer Sciences, University of Glasgow

Each month, Simply Blood spotlights a lab focused on the research of basic hematology, immunology, stem cell research, cell and gene therapy, and other related aspects. Get to know these different labs around the world! This month, we are featuring the Helgasson Lab at the School of Cancer Sciences at the University of Glasgow!

What is the research focus of your lab?

My lab focuses on basic cellular processes such as autophagy and metabolism in leukaemia. We are

trying to exploit vulnerabilities in these processes and identify ways to develops better treatment options.

Did you plan your career and how did it develop?
No, to be honest, I never really had a master plan for my career. However, I was always good in seeking advice from people who could help me achieve my goals.

During my studies at the University of Iceland, deCODE Genetics, a biopharmaceutical company based in Reykjavik, was founded, and offered a lot of interesting jobs, so I decided to take additional modules in molecular and cell biology at university and applied for a job with them after my degree BSc graduation. I really enjoyed the work at deCODE, which was mainly cell biology based. I had team members that had completed a Ph.D. and they liked my work attributes and encouraged me to apply for Ph.D. positions, mainly in the U.K. given the great reputation of British Universities. Initially, my plan was to go back to Iceland afterwards. However, I really enjoyed my Ph.D. journey in Prof Kevin Ryan's laboratory at the Cancer Research UK Beatson Institute in Glasgow, U.K. and became even more interested in cell biology, cancer and autophagy. After my Ph.D. I explored my options, mainly in the U.K. again. There was an opening in Prof. Tessa Holyoake's laboratory at the Paul O'Gorman Leukemia Centre in Glasgow and after an informal meeting with Tessa, I was inspired by her research and felt she would be a great mentor. Tessa aimed to recruit someone who could work independently, and with inner drive to achieve, and thought I would fit the bill, so I started working with Tessa on CML. Tessa was obviously well known for her outstanding translational work in CML. She was also a very engaging character and inspired me to go down the path of research with an orientation towards translation in leukaemia. During my post-doc I combined my interest in autophagy and cancer, creating my own research niche. Based on a collaboration with Prof Calabretta's group (Philadelphia) and my results, Tessa received funding to start a clinical trial with autophagy inhibitors in CML. That was very exciting and really motivated me to continue in academia.

I next decided to start my path towards independence and applied for fellowships to start my own lab. In 2013 I received a Kay Kendall Intermediate Fellowship which kick started my independent career. Again, I received a lot of help from senior PIs at the Cancer Centre in Glasgow. So, although I never really planned to become a group leader, it somehow happened, and it really is something I enjoy and am grateful for.

Did you have a plan B in case your academic research did not follow through?
Yes, I did. I had worked in a company and enjoyed working in industry, so this was always my plan B. In general, I think it is always good to have a plan B so you are not setting yourself up for disappointment, but also so you are not restricting yourself in your development and can seek opportunities where they arise!

Any tips for running a successful group?
Apart from being open to acknowledge your limitations and not being shy to seek help where needed, resilience is very important. Not every project or grant application you submit will be successful, so you have to find a way to deal with drawbacks. Being a people's person helps. In my case, it allowed me to

build up a dynamic and enthusiastic research team, but also helped to initiate and maintain fruitful collaborations. I also encouraged the people in my group to create space to develop their own ideas and drive aspects of their research forward, and this has really paid off. I think about my team's culture and put a lot of effort into the recruitment process to ensure I recruit the right people for my lab and ensure diversity.

What is the most exciting project in the lab right now?
I don't have a particular favorite, but I like the way we try to understand basic molecular functions, such as autophagy and more recently metabolism, clinically relevant cell population, that is in the leukemic stem cells. We also started to explore the role of the microenvironment/immune cells in leukaemia and again, this has led to lots of new findings and ideas.

How does your lab celebrate accomplishments?
We usually have a cake in the office and then go to the pub followed by dinner. It is important to celebrate small and big victories to keep everyone motivated, but also to create an atmosphere where people can connect on a personal level, enjoy themselves and relax.

Does your lab have any traditions?
We don't have any tradition as such that I can remember, but given we are 13 different nationalities in the lab, we have friendly debates about which country ranks the highest for the best cuisine. I am really proud of the fact we are so diverse and can learn from each other about culture and food, but also ways of life and ways of thinking. This is one of the most fun aspects of science - it is very international.

Vignir Helgason, Ph.D.
Leukaemia and Autophagy Therapeutics
School of Cancer Sciences, University of Glasgow, U.K.
https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/cancersciences/staff/vignirhelgason/

Blog post contributed by: ***Kristina Kirschner*** *(@krikirschner), ISEH Publications Committee*

Enter Comment

Popular posts from this blog

ISEH 2025 Society Award Winners

- *March 11, 2025*

On behalf of the Awards Committee, ISEH would like to congratulate the recipients of the 2025 ISEH Society Awards which will be presented at the ISEH 54th Annual Scientific Meeting . Donald Metcalf Award Winner - Constanze Bonifer The recipient of the 2025 Donald Metcalf Award is Dr. Constanze ...

READ MORE

Message from the President: 2021 Society Updates

- *March 25, 2021*

Dear Friends and Colleagues, I write this message reflecting upon what was an unprecedented time for hematology and hematology researchers. Looking back on last year, I am truly amazed by how our ...

READ MORE

Lab Spotlight: Vanuytsel Lab

- *November 14, 2024*

Each month, Simply Blood spotlights a lab contributing to the fields of hematology, immunology, stem cell research, cell and gene therapies, and more. Get to know groups doing cutting edge research from around the world! This month, we are featuring the Vanuytsel Lab which is based out of the Center for …

READ MORE