

VOICE: 'Science for Advocates' Residential Study Week: 1st – 6th September 2024
Barts Cancer Institute, Charterhouse Square, London
Report for City of London Newsletter

For over ten years, researchers at Barts Cancer Institute have worked with [Independent Cancer Patients' Voice \(ICPV\)](#), a charity led by cancer patients, to develop and deliver a tailor-made science course for patient advocates. The course provides intensive training in basic cancer biology, hands-on laboratory experience, an introduction to research terminology and study design, and critical evaluation of research proposals and scientific papers. This is **VOICE** - Vision on Information, Confidence and Engagement.

VOICE is unique, the only course of this type in the UK. The aim of the course is to educate and nurture patient advocates who are involved in cancer research. To date, over one hundred patient advocates have been through VOICE.

The 11th VOICE course took place at Barts from the 1st to the 6th of September this year, with sixteen students attending. All of the students had some experience of cancer, either their own diagnosis or experience as a family member or carer, or with a vocational role. The students became 'real students' for the week, living in University accommodation, attending morning lectures at Bart's Cancer Institute (Charterhouse Square) and taking part in laboratory practical sessions each afternoon.

Lectures included Basic Cancer Biology by Professors John Marshall and Richard Grose and lectures on specific cancers including lung, breast and bowel. Practical sessions included the students learning how to use micro pipettes, running PCR's (as in the COVID pandemic) with Dr Angus Cameron and observing a fresh tissue dissection by Professor Louise Jones.

The students also enjoyed a trip to the Blizard Institute where they toured the 'Centre of the Cell' with Professor Frances Balkwill.

Students had plenty of opportunity for developing new friendships and working relationships with both fellow students and with academic lecturers.

Some thoughts and quotes from the students:

'I enjoyed developing my lab skills. We all found the need for extreme accuracy and patience more difficult than expected.' [AMcB]

'The number of cells in the body, the fact that cells continuously communicate with each other, how they signal, the need for good neighbours and what happens when it goes wrong were all very well explained.' [AMcB]

'[I learnt that] chemotherapy was discovered by accident, after a ship containing mustard gas was bombed in World War II, releasing the toxic gas and exposing many civilians to it. Whilst many of these civilians died from it, surprisingly, the condition of some of the survivors who happened to have cancer improved.' [SH]

'Main take home messages are (i) cancer is complicated (ii) there are an astonishing number of DNA replications every second with so much potential for things to go wrong, that I am amazed that we don't just fall apart!' [SH]

'Metastatic disease needs much more research and we are nowhere near a cure!' [AMcB]

