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Southwest Oncology Group (swog.org)

Southwest Oncology Group news for immediate release

SWOG names five cancer researchers as outstanding Young Investigators

Three-day Southwest Oncology Group Young Investigator course trains physicians to develop and implement cancer clinical trials

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — The Southwest Oncology Group, or SWOG, one of the nation's largest cancer clinical trials networks, has selected five talented researchers who are early in their careers for its 2010 Young Investigator Training Course (YITC). These five will attend a three-day workshop September 13 – 15 in Seattle, WA for intensive training in how to design and conduct cancer clinical trials.

To date this nationally acclaimed program has provided intensive mentorship and career support to 56 investigators. With detailed instruction in protocol development, trial management, and statistical analysis, the course is designed to build a cohort of trained clinical trial researchers with a thorough understanding of Group procedures and the ability to efficiently plan and execute high-priority studies, which in some cases might enroll thousands of patients at hundreds of treatment sites.

Each Young Investigator presents a research proposal as part of the application process, and those proposals are closely reviewed and refined during the workshop. Many of the proposals advanced in previous workshops have since been launched as studies with National Cancer Institute funding.

Costs of the Young Investigator program are paid for with a gift from The Hope Foundation (thehopefoundation.org), a philanthropic arm of the Southwest Oncology Group that raises funds for educational and research efforts.

Below are the names of the 2010 SWOG Young Investigators and descriptions of their proposals.

Sikander Ailawadhi, assistant professor of medicine, University of Southern California:

Ailawadhi has proposed a clinical trial to test the effect of a three-drug combination of carfilzomib, cyclophosphamide, and dexamethasone in multiple myeloma (MM) patients who have disease relapse outside the bone marrow, known as extramedullary relapse. "This is an increasingly identified condition which carries a very poor prognosis," says Ailawadhi, "but there are no specific therapeutic approaches for it yet."

Myeloma cells typically do not grow outside the bone marrow, so developing extramedullary relapsed disease may be a sign of change in MM biology. This proposed study would also explore whether identifying gene expression signatures in these patients can improve our understanding of the molecular mechanisms involved in progression of this disease from the bone marrow into extramedullary sites.

Heather Greenlee, N.D., Ph.D., assistant professor of epidemiology and medical oncology, Columbia University:

With doctoral training in cancer epidemiology and clinical training as a naturopathic physician, Greenlee researches the effects of complementary and alternative medicine therapies on treatment toxicities, patient quality of life, cancer recurrence, and survival.

She has proposed a study among breast and colorectal cancer survivors to assess the feasibility of a weight loss intervention using the Curves® weight loss program, which combines circuit-based exercise with a calorie-reduced diet high in fruits and vegetables and low in fat. This study concept is now under review at the National Cancer Institute as proposed SWOG trial S1008.

Kevin Kalinsky, M.D., assistant professor of medicine, Columbia University:

Kalinsky has proposed a phase I study of a regimen that combines antibodies to human epidermal growth factor receptor 3 (HER3) and insulin-like growth factor 1 receptor (IGF-1R) with trastuzumab (Herceptin®) in patients with advanced solid tumors.

Trastuzumab can help control breast cancer in which the HER2 gene is amplified (multiple copies of the gene are made) or HER2 itself is overexpressed. It does this by interfering with the HER2 receptor, but many patients become resistant to the drug's effects. Recent research suggests that HER2, HER3, and IGF-1R work together in creating this resistance in some breast cancer cells. Kalinsky's proposed study would target these latter two receptors directly in an attempt to make tumor cells more sensitive to trastuzumab.

Tina (Tianhong) Li, M.D., Ph.D., assistant professor of medicine, UC Davis Cancer Center:

Li proposes a phase II study pitting the drugs crizotinib and pemetrexed against crizotinib alone in patients whose non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) hasn't responded to platinum-based therapy and harbors a particular genetic abnormality known as the EML4-ALK fusion oncogene.

Current data suggest that the frequency of several variants of this EML4-ALK fusion oncogene, which is only 4-6% among all NSCLC patients, is particularly high in younger patients and in non-smokers or light smokers. The study would screen this subset of NSCLC patients for the genetic marker to determine trial eligibility.

SWOG's Lung Committee approved this proposal for further development during the spring 2010 Group Meeting.

Margarett Shnorhavorian, M.D., M.P.H., assistant professor of urology, University of Washington:

Shnorhavorian is the first investigator to participate in the course as part of a recent partnership between SWOG and the Children's Oncology Group (COG) that opens the YITC to researchers honored with COG's Aflac Young Investigator Award in Adolescent and Young Adult Oncology, which Shnorhavorian received in 2009.

She has proposed a pilot study of infertility and gonadal dysfunction in male survivors of adolescent and young adult (AYA) osteosarcomas who were treated with cisplatin chemotherapy. Cisplatin and other similar drugs have cumulative dose ranges above which most patients will be rendered infertile, but Shnorhavorian says population-based studies are needed to describe the prevalence of these effects in survivors of AYA malignancies.

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SWOG (swog.org) is one of the largest cancer clinical trials cooperative groups in the United States. Funded primarily by the National Cancer Institute, the Group designs and conducts clinical trials to advance the science of cancer prevention and treatment and to improve the quality of life for cancer survivors. The almost 5,000 physician-researchers in the Group's network practice at more than 500 institutions, including 19 of the National Cancer Institute-designated Comprehensive Cancer Centers. The Group is headquartered at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Mich. (734-998-7140). The Group has an operations office in San Antonio, Texas and a statistical center in Seattle, Wash.