

PhD Program Biomedicine – Travel Grant Report

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The ACR Convergence represents one of the most important rheumatology annual meetings, attracting more than 13'000 clinicians, researchers, and healthcare professionals. Here, the latest developments in basic translational and clinical research, covering the full scope of rheumatic diseases, are on display in almost 400 sessions over the course of six days. Research is subject to critical interrogation in formats including lectures, panel discussions, oral and poster presentations. In addition, workshops, networking events, and industry-sponsored exhibitions offer the opportunity for advanced training and collaborations.

My research is dedicated towards the advancement of precision medicine concepts for patients with fibrosing interstitial lung disease, a common manifestation of many rheumatic autoimmune disorders. More specifically, I am studying if computed tomography derived biomedical imaging features, termed "radiomics", may serve as surrogates for molecular tissue-derived readouts. The presence of such correlations would have great implications for diagnosis and disease monitoring due to its non-invasive nature. At the venue, I had the opportunity to present my results in poster format for two hours. To my surprise, the topic gained much attention, resulting in non-stop active discussions with experts and peers from the field. Collectively, the input was highly beneficial for me to identify study limitations, address frequently asked questions, and design follow-up analyses to make key findings more robust. Importantly, the knowledge about a genuinely interested audience further sparked my motivation to finish this project to the best of my abilities.

Apart from the poster hall, I spent most of my time in the distinguished abstract sessions, where I was listening to outstanding scientists whose name I otherwise only knew from their publications. For me, the scientific highlights were the many new insights into the disease pathophysiology of autoimmune disorders based on single cell transcriptome studies, which allow to elucidate the role of individual cell subtypes for disease development. Interestingly, the sum of topics also gave me to opportunity to take a step back and contextualize my own research in a greater scope. Finally, I was delighted to meet collaboration partners and friends I made at previous conferences and workshops.

The amount of information and interaction that needed to be absorbed in such a brief period surely was exhaustive. Luckily however, I was able spent my session-free time with lab mates, collaborators, and friends visiting the San Diego Zoo, the Coronado Beach, and sharing a team dinner.

Attending the ACR Convergence 2023 meeting was an invaluable experience, which allowed me to expand my knowledge, connect to other researchers, and increase the visibility of my work. I am thus extremely grateful to the BioMed PhD Program for awarding me a travel grant that enabled me to take this once-in-a-PhD opportunity.

