

Media release

SAKK distinguishes Swiss cancer research with awards and a research grant

The Swiss Group for Clinical Cancer Research (SAKK) is committed to independent clinical cancer research at the highest level in Switzerland. Therefore, at this year's semi-annual meeting in Lucerne, five SAKK awards and one research grant for established and junior researchers were presented.

What it's all about:

- At its semi-annual meeting held at the Lucerne Culture and Congress Centre, SAKK presented five awards and one research grant worth a total of CHF 1,160,000 to particularly promising studies relating to clinical cancer research.
- SAKK offers scientists an ideal platform for their study projects through collaboration with industry and research partners. This includes financial, conceptual and expert personnel support which creates optimal conditions for independent clinical cancer research.
- SAKK and its partners thus make a valuable contribution to the promotion of young talent in oncology and hematology at an excellent international level in Switzerland.

Five prizes and one research grant were awarded at the awards ceremony. Partners from the pharmaceutical industry support the prize money. The SAKK Awards recognize researchers for special achievements in various fields of cancer treatment research.

"SAKK/AbbVie Digital Innovation Award": SAKK supports artificial intelligence in breast cancer diagnostics

Genetic tests of the tumor are consulted in the diagnosis of breast cancer in order to select the most effective treatment for patients. As a result, breast cancer therapy has evolved in recent years from conventional chemotherapy to personalized treatment options. Oncotype-DX is currently used as an advanced analysis method, but it also has its limitations. Researchers Dr Elene Diana Chiru and PD Dr Marcus Vetter from the Cantonal Hospital Baselland in Liestal therefore want to use artificial intelligence (AI) to incorporate further clinical and pathological data from their patients into the diagnostic process. The Ataraxis AI model they are investigating could overcome the limitations of the Oncotype DX genetic testing method used to date. In previous studies, the new algorithm has shown promising predictive potential also for less common genetic breast cancer variants and is, in addition, cheaper and significantly



faster. The AI-based integration of diagnostic data could help doctors even more reliably in making treatment decisions in the future.

"SAKK/Astellas GU-Oncology" Award: SAKK honors research on new treatment option for prostate cancer

Human body cells use a special mechanism with which they can dynamically switch on important genes for DNA repair when necessary. Tumor cells also possess this mechanism, called minor intron splicing. They can use it for instance during cancer treatment in order to survive and thus become resistant to therapy. Based on this finding, Dr Anke Katharina Augspach and her colleagues at the University of Bern have developed a new approach to treating prostate cancer. They were able to show that therapy-resistant prostate cancer cells survived less well when the minor splicing mechanism was inhibited by a so-called siRNA. Healthy body cells were not affected by this inhibition. Minor splicing also plays a role in other solid tumors – therefore, the treatment approach described might benefit various therapeutic areas.

"SAKK/BMS HEM Pioneer" Grant: Funding for research to prevent graft-versus-host disease after allogeneic hematopoietic stem cell transplantation

Allogeneic hematopoietic stem cell transplantation (allo-HSCT) is used for a wide range of hematological diseases. The most common non-infectious complication is graft-versus-host disease (GvHD), which is also the main cause of death without relapse. Immunosuppressants are currently used for GvHD prophylaxis, but these can inhibit the anti-tumor effect of allo-HSCT. Researcher PD Dr Chiara Bernardi from Geneva University Hospital (HUG) and her team would therefore like to develop a new cell therapy based on regulatory T cells (Treg). Thanks to their immunoregulatory effect, the use of these human ICOS-CAR-Treg cells should prevent the occurrence of the dreaded non-infectious complication.

"SAKK//Gilead Expanding Horizons in Oncology" Award: SAKK distinguishes training of healthcare professionals in patient involvement

The increased involvement of patients promises benefits for oncological research and drug development, for example in the evaluation of new treatment methods. The European Patients Academy on Therapeutic Innovation (EUPATI) has therefore issued recommendations on patient involvement in clinical trials and the Oncology Institute of Southern Switzerland (IOSI) has launched a corresponding initiative in 2023. As part of joint SAKK and IOSI activities in this area, Dr Marcio Cefali from the Ente Ospedaliero Cantonale (EOC) is now organizing workshops that will give healthcare professionals in oncology and hematology an understanding of i) what patient involvement means and why it is relevant, ii) how the concept can be established in clinical research and iii) the advantages but also the difficulties of patient involvement in everyday clinical practice. After completing the workshops, participants will be actively involved in ongoing SAKK and IOSI projects in line with their training, for example by helping to prepare patients for participation in advisory boards or in developing new study protocols.



"Novartis Together for Patients Award": Funding for the expansion of outpatient oncology rehabilitation

Thanks to the increasing number of innovative and effective cancer therapies, more and more patients are being cured or achieve a long phase of remission. In view of possible disease- or therapy-related complaints such as chronic fatigue syndrome, reintegration into work and social life is an important issue. To support patients, Dr Kristin Zeidler-Knoblauch has established an outpatient oncology rehabilitation program at the four hospitals of the LUKS Group. Due to its popularity, the program reached its capacity limit shortly after its introduction and is now to be expanded. The aim is to improve the program's educational content, increase participants' adherence through motivational training and provide answers to frequently asked questions in the form of a video. In addition, an interprofessional team will hold a workshop to develop approaches to further optimize the program and conduct clinical research on outpatient oncological rehabilitation. A publication will then summarize how the facilitates daily clinical life for patients and what impact it has on their reintegration.

«SAKK Trial Award 2023-2024»: High testosterone dose in combination therapy for prostate cancer (ISOTONIC trial) receives funding

Men with prostate cancer are currently treated palliatively with androgen deprivation therapy (ADT) by means of surgical or medical castration. The lack of testosterone causes unpleasant side effects, and the treatment can often only moderately extend the survival of those affected. The project of Prof Dr Christian Fankhauser from Lucerne Cantonal Hospital is pursuing the opposite direction. In the ISOTONIC trial, he and his team want to investigate the effectiveness of a high dose of testosterone in combination with another drug against prostate cancer. The trick: the two drugs cancel out each other's side effect. While one drug causes anemia, testosterone (as in doping) is associated with an increased number of red blood cells. In order to be able to test the effectiveness of the combination therapy, Prof Dr Christian Fankhauser is receiving one million Swiss francs from SAKK. If the results are positive, patients could also benefit from an improved quality of life and restored sexual function as a result of the testosterone.

For questions and further information

Petra Streit, Communications +41 31 508 42 05, media@sakk.ch
You can find **further information** about SAKK at: www.sakk.ch

About the Swiss Group for Clinical Cancer Research (SAKK)

SAKK is the biggest competence center for clinical cancer research in Switzerland. The not-for-profit organization was established as an association in 1965. As a competence center, the objective of SAKK is to network its members, research cancer therapies, refine existing treatments and improve the chances of a cure for cancer patients. This is achieved through cooperation within Switzerland and with partners in



SAKK Competence Center
Effingerstrasse 33
3008 Bern
+41 31 389 91 91
media@sakk.ch

other countries. Researching physicians are helped to develop and conduct multicenter and interdisciplinary trials independently of the pharmaceutical industry. The members of SAKK are the clinical oncology centers at university, cantonal and private hospitals. They work with other hospitals and physicians, and together form the SAKK network.