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# Heart & Blood

## Professor Michael O'Dwyer

Director of Blood Cancer Network Ireland on the exciting developments in blood cancer research

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INSPIRATION

EXPERT TIPS



By **John McCormack**  
Chief Executive Officer,  
Irish Cancer Society

## Outlook for blood cancer patients improves

Every year, around 1,500 people in Ireland are diagnosed with blood cancer – an umbrella term for cancers that affect the blood, bone marrow and lymphatic system. The most common include leukaemia, myeloma and lymphoma.

“Overall, these conditions make up around ten per cent of all cancers in Ireland, and are the fourth most common cause of cancer-related deaths,” explains Mr John McCormack, Chief Executive Officer of the Irish Cancer Society. Yet, survival rates have more than doubled over the last five years for some of these cancers, largely because we understand the disease better and we have improved means to fight it.”

### Concentrating cancer expertise

A number of other factors appear to have contributed to the improvement in survival observed in recent years. Arguably one of the most important is the fact that since 2006 cancer patients in Ireland have been screened, diagnosed, treated and followed-up in a small number of larger designated hospitals and a satellite centre, he explains.

### More personalised treatments

Mr McCormack would like to see more blood cancer patients being offered early stage clinical trials.

“It’s worth pointing out that the Irish Clinical Oncology Research Group (ICORG) provides opportunities for all the doctors and many of the nurses who are involved in diagnosing and treating cancer to work in a collective manner, to make sure that new clinical trials are brought to Ireland and patients can access them.

“In the long run this will enable clinicians to provide more personalised treatment options, based on the individual characteristics of each patient and the genetic make-up of their cancer, further improving the likelihood of positive outcomes.”



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# Getting new drugs to patients faster through clinical trials

By Lorena Tonarelli

Professor Michael O’Dwyer, of the National University of Ireland (NUI), Galway, is director of Blood Cancer Network Ireland (BCNI), which aims to facilitate patient access to innovative blood cancer therapies through participation in early stage, or Phase I, clinical trials.

He says: “We want to provide the greatest access possible, as novel treatments are making a difference to patients. For example, in multiple myeloma, a cancer of the bone marrow, there has been a stepwise increase in survival, over the last 15 years, as a result of the incremental improvements with each new drug developed. In the 1990s the median survival for the condition was three years. Today, 50 per

cent of patients can expect to live five to seven years, and a small proportion of those with a better risk profile can actually be cured.”

### Clinical trials in Ireland

The problem is, it may take years before a new drug is approved and the government agrees to pay for it. Frequently, the only way for patients to gain early access is via a clinical trial.



PHOTO: IRISH CANCER SOCIETY

**Pictured at the launch of Blood Cancer Network Ireland (BCNI)** at the Lambe Institute for Translational Research in Galway were Director General Science Foundation Ireland, Professor Mark Ferguson; Minister for Skills, Research, and Innovation, Mr Damien English TD; BCNI Director Professor Michael O’Dwyer, Professor of Haematology at NUI Galway; and Head of Research at the Irish Cancer Society, Dr Robert O’Connor.



PHOTO: IRISH CANCER SOCIETY

**Pictured at the launch of Blood Cancer Network Ireland (BCNI)** at the Lambe Institute for Translational Research in Galway were BCNI Director Professor Michael O’Dwyer, Professor of Haematology at NUI Galway, with patient Paul Daly, who is living with Chronic Lymphocytic Leukaemia, and Minister for Skills, Research, and Innovation, Mr Damien English TD

In this regard, an exciting area of blood cancer research is immunotherapy, which uses components of the immune system such as antibodies or cells to fight the cancer. Later this year BCNI will be launching, among others, a Phase I clinical trial to test a new antibody for multiple myeloma treatment. This antibody, which was approved last November by the US Food and Drug Administration but is not yet available in Europe, binds to the surface of myeloma cancer cells, inducing their death. It will be tested in combination with the standard initial chemotherapy regimen for myeloma, which may play an important role in reactivating the immune system.

“This trial is unique to Ireland,” explains Professor O’Dwyer. “It will be the first to combine this antibody with a backbone regimen containing cyclophosphamide for initial treatment. And we believe that, because of the immunogenic effects of the chemotherapy regimen, the combination has the potential to greatly enhance the antibody’s activity.”

Another promising research area focuses on small molecules similar to carbohydrates, called glycomimetics. Professor O’Dwyer is currently leading a clinical trial using one of these compounds as a novel therapy for acute myeloid leukaemia – a



**Professor Michael O’Dwyer**  
Director of Blood Cancer Network  
Ireland (BCNI)

“An exciting area of blood cancer research is immunotherapy: using components of the immune system to fight the cancer”

cancer of the blood and bone marrow and the most common type of acute leukaemia in adults.

### Patients benefit

“It’s great to be able to give patients the opportunity to try novel treatments that could potentially help control their disease, especially when standard treatment options have been exhausted. Increasingly, with an improved understanding of blood cancer biology and targeted treatments, patients are deriving real benefit. In addition, we are better able to establish the optimal dose of new drugs, reducing the risk of side effects,” says Professor O’Dwyer.

Phase I clinical trials were once considered as a last resort, he adds. Now, they are increasingly viewed as a real option for many patients. “Ultimately, participation in clinical trials means patients can access promising, potentially-life saving treatments faster, for their own benefit, and that of future patients.” ■



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COLUMN



**Dr Robert O’Connor**  
Head of Research at the  
Irish Cancer Society

## Investments and collaboration bring more hope for patients

“The situation for blood cancer patients in Ireland is improving,” says head of research at the Irish Cancer Society, Dr Robert O’Connor. “Treatments are more effective, with fewer side effects. Quality of life and survival rates have improved.

“However blood cancers, which affect one in ten Irish cancer patients, are still generally serious. So, it’s vital that Ireland continues to improve treatment and outcomes. The Irish Cancer Society and Science Foundation Ireland have invested €2.2m in a new clinical research network which will offer the latest medicines and therapies through involvement in early-stage clinical trials.”

### More treatment options

The Blood Cancer Network Ireland (BCNI) was launched last November. “Treatments for blood cancers are generally not curative,” notes O’Connor. “But, new therapies give patients more options now.”

### Improving awareness and referrals

“We are improving awareness of signs and symptoms. These may include unexplained tiredness, weight loss, night sweats and lumps in the neck area. Early diagnosis can be critical,” explains O’Connor: “And we are hoping to speed up the journey to treatment.”

### A vision for the future

Blood cancer patients are already experiencing benefits from improved care.

But there is more to be done. As O’Connor notes, “Ireland has some of the best blood cancer specialists. Our vision is to continue to bring them together, enabling them to further improve therapies and support, so that Irish blood cancer patients can have the best opportunity of a positive outcome.”