

**12<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Oligonucleotide Therapeutics Society**  
**September 25-28, 2016**  
**Montreal, Canada**

*Submitted By Petra Disterer, PhD*  
*OTS Science Writer*

**Meeting Matters from Montreal**

Nearly 450 people attended the annual meeting of the Society in Montreal this past September, with two-thirds affiliated with industry and one-third from academia. This is quite a change from the 2015 Annual Meeting, when the balance was close to 50/50, but it does showcase that oligonucleotide therapeutics are re-gaining attention in pharmaceutical industry circles. The sheer number of different companies represented was impressive. Academics from all over the world also attended with Japanese universities particularly well represented.

As it is impossible to do justice to all the science and clinical data presented at the meeting in a short narrative and considering what is already available in the abstracts, this meeting report will focus on other events that took place during the meeting.

**Preconference Session: Oligonucleotide Therapeutics Education Workshop**

This workshop was a huge hit when it was introduced last year and the videos of the presentations have been one of the most popular additions to the website since then.

This year's session, *Nucleic Acid Therapeutics Development 101*, did not disappoint. Four excellent presentations with lots of practical advice from Marc Lemaitre (on manufacturing oligonucleotides), Paloma Giangrande (on all things aptamer), Paul Burke (on delivery hurdles in the translation of oligonucleotide therapeutics) and Jennifer Lockridge (on what you need to do to get an oligonucleotide therapeutic into the clinic) set the tone for the meeting.

Recordings of these lectures are available on the website.

**Meet the Companies**

This was the first year the Society held a "Meet the Companies" event in an effort to facilitate networking between companies and junior scientists. Representatives from eight companies (Alnylam, Arrowhead, Axolabs, Idera, Ionis, Sarepta, Silence Therapeutics and TriLink) took part along with many participants. The intent behind this event was to foster interaction between academia and industry and give young scientists the opportunity to investigate life in industry. The event allowed for some really in depth conversations and the companies certainly made an effort with some very senior representatives present. Feedback from participating scientists and companies has been very positive, so this event will likely stay on the schedule for future years.

**Meet the Experts**

The “Meet the Experts” event ran for the sixth consecutive year and again, participation was high. The format was to meet over lunch for a casual discussion on a particular topic. The number of topics and tables increased from previous years to accommodate the interest shown last year when there were quite a few names on the waiting list for every table.

This year’s topics ranged from “Careers in Industry” (with either Mano Manoharan from Alnylam, Tod Woolf from Etagen or Frank Rigo from Ionis) to “Starting a Company” with Steve Dowdy to “Finding a Great Post-Doc” with Jonathan Watts. “Oligo Delivery: Challenges” were discussed at tables led by Paul Burke and Laura Sepp-Lorenzino, while Paloma Giangrande covered “Aptamers” and Anastasia Khvorova debated “Academia vs. Industry”.

### **Meet the Professor**

Despite the early start (7am!) over 70 people attended the “Meet the Professor” event on Wednesday morning.

Dr. Stanley Crooke, who later in the day was awarded the OTS Lifetime Achievement award, turned out to be an incredibly personable and inspiring speaker. He talked movingly about his personal background (he was the first person in his family to graduate high school) and motivations for becoming a doctor (no particular calling until the first time he saw a patient) and his move into drug development (a way of helping more patients).

When talking about the difficulties and hard decisions that he had to make over the years as founder and CEO of Ionis Pharmaceuticals, he did not pull his punches. For example, when asked about difficult times the company faced he said that it surprised him how much some people in the press, investment communities and online seemed to enjoy the thought that Ionis Pharmaceuticals would fail. He added that at the same time there were many contrary investors who stuck with and saved the company during those times. At times, he was tempted to “settle” for better short-term return for investors, but that in the end he’d always put long-term benefit to patients over short-term profit, as the former would lead to more sustainable benefit for both. He admitted that that had not made him very popular sometimes – as he said later on: “Leaders are a pain in the ... because they aim to achieve a different world.”

Also memorable was an aside to Mano Manoharan (Alnylam) about GalNAc delivery to hepatocytes. “I axed the GalNAc research at Ionis because I did not think it was going anywhere, but thankfully Mano kept pushing it, so thank you Mano!”

Definitely a highlight of the conference – it will be very difficult to compete with the standard Stan set for this event!