

*Attending the GRC Collagen, July 14-19 2013, New London, NH*

This was my tenth Gordon Conference!

I went to this Conference as if I had something special to celebrate. Possibly the fact that having the privilege in participating and bringing your research to a Gordon Research Conference (GRC) is always something special, and, this was the tenth time that I was given this great and unique opportunity.

After 8 Basement Membrane GRCs and one Collagen GRC attended two years ago, I attended for the second time the Collagen GRC where I presented a poster. The conference this year was excellent, as usual, and surely one of my favourite GRCs.

GRCs are managed by the Gordon Organization and cover a wide range of topics. Each conference lasts nearly a week, from a Sunday evening, to the following Friday evening, and, the following day, after breakfast, the delegates leave. The actual scientific programme of each particular event is directed by a Chair and a Vice-Chair. The Vice-Chair will chair the next GRC on the same topic which will take place two years later. Therefore, at each GRC a new Vice-Chair for the next conference is elected by the delegates, and, the number of delegates allowed to attend a given conference is in the order of magnitude between 100 and 200. This is a perfect size. So, despite the variety of topics and of locations, GRCs follow a general framework.

The most thrilling aspect of all GRCs is that it is a week of full and intense immersion in high level of science that it almost makes you forget the heat and mosquitoes, typical of the many GRCs held in the US East coast around that period of the year.

As for two years ago, this GRC was held in New London, NH, in the US. This year the heat was less annoying than usual but still the venue was in the middle of nowhere. This is the real winning strategy of the GRC. No matter on which topic, GRCs are always in strategic locations where it is impossible to escape. In other words they are not in the heart of Manhattan near to Central Park or near the Fori Imperiali in Rome, but in places where people have little chance to move out of the site before the conference is over and where the level of tourist attractions within walking distance is close to zero. The accommodation may be sometimes called "*spartan*" ... but this is something easily tolerable for a week, even though its level of frugality increases as your age progresses parallel to the increasing number of GRCs attended!

At the end of the day, everything that delegates need for the week is on site. The conference fees also include, other than the participation, the accommodation and all the meals. I have to say, and this was general consensus this year, the quality of the food at this venue was excellent. In the evening there was a get together with drinks and snacks beside the poster hall, and during the day, in the breaks, there was the possibility of recreational activities such as football, kayaking, tennis etc.....which were shared with other delegates.

This favours interactions and obviously greatly increases the chances to exchange ideas with all other colleagues. Yes, in fact this is the greatest bit of all! The whole philosophy on the format of the GRCs largely favours the free development of ideas. Some of them end up in great scientific collaborations and some further develop into long lasting friendships. This is what always impressed me most. By going to a GRC, every scientist, in particular the youngest ones, have the chance to informally come across the cutting edge of the field, in other words they get to know the persons that generate the knowledge which is written in the textbooks. When I first started, I found it absolutely exciting and, still I find it as a privilege every time I am there. The dress code is strictly informal, so is the interaction between delegates.

Also the Collagen GRC 2013 was perfectly in sync with the whole ethos of the GRC. The conference entirely fulfilled my expectations, not only for the quality of the topics and speakers chosen, but also in the logistic and practical organization (first of all the space given to the poster sessions), which is a great merit to the Chair and Vice-Chair for the excellent work that they have done. It was completely in line with the motto of the Gordon Conferences, i.e., "frontiers of science".

At this stage of the report it is probably already clear that I am a great fan of GRCs and that I really enjoyed this last one as well. If I was asked what is the most important part of all, my answer would surely be "the friendly and informal constructive interaction" which, to any scientist, no matter how experienced, is invaluable and it is the ingredient that makes science progress.

This is in fact one of the most unique aspects about Gordon Conferences. The Gordon Organization promotes ideals of openness and frankness amongst scientists which creates an ideal situation for optimal and relaxed exchange of ideas. The consequence of this is that in Gordon Conferences, there is a policy of absolute confidentiality. For this

reason, I cannot go into detail of the contents and of the speakers. However, you can find the schedules of this Collagen Conference, as well as those of the many past and future Conferences on line, at <http://www.grc.org/>

Despite the fact that the venue is far from being the centre of the world, it is very easy to get there and, at the end of the conference, it is very easy to leave. Like for every GRC, also for this one, the Gordon Organization provided a service of chartered busses and the journey to the conference venue took about 2 hours. For conferences in the New England area the bases are usually Boston, Providence and Manchester, NH. I landed at Logan Airport in Boston where the GRC busses collect the delegates from a hotel near the airport, which can be easily reached by the complimentary hotel shuttle. When the conference was over I arrived back to Boston shortly before noon. Since my flight back to Ireland was in the evening, I had the chance to do some sightseeing (there is the possibility to host the baggage in the hotel connected with the GRC for a layover in Boston of a few hours). As usual it was hot, but Boston is always beautiful. Ideally, you get close to the waterfront and try to overcome the heat with a tour of Boston Harbour, the air conditioning of some seafood restaurants, or a trip on the water taxi. My departure from Logan was followed by a long sleep on the plane and, when I opened my eyes in the middle of a fantastic blue sky, I saw the beauty of the Shannon estuary where we landed a few minutes later. I was back home!

Paraphrasing a very popular quote in the world of rock music, I would say: “the scientific community can be divided into 2 categories: those who love GRCs and those who have never experienced one”. I would recommend it to any colleague: do apply to GRCs in your field!

This was my second Collagen GRC, an excellent one, and I would love to attend the next ones in this field as well.

Finally, I would like to thank the Anatomical Society for supporting my participation to this great event.

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