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Research in Graubünden

Research as an important source of hope

Cancer therapies are evolving rapidly



“No other field of medicine is progressing as rapidly as oncology,” says physician Tamer El Saadany. He also values the fact that oncology allows for an intensive doctor-patient relationship. “Cancer patients are often in extreme situations. It’s important that they receive not only medical treatment but also human support.” El Saadany completed a large part of his specialist training in oncology at the Cantonal Hospital of Graubünden (KSGR). There, physicians conduct numerous clinical studies to bring new findings into practice as quickly as possible.

The Cantonal Hospital of Graubünden is also actively involved in research.
Photo credit: Ralph Feiner

For a long time, classical chemotherapy was the most important method of treating cancer.

“Chemotherapeutic agents work by targeting rapidly dividing cells – tumor cells, but unfortunately also healthy ones,” El Saadany explains. In recent years, two additional approaches have become established: immunotherapy and personalized therapy. Immunotherapy is a revolution in cancer medicine. “The body’s immune system constantly patrols and normally eliminates cells that don’t behave as they should,” says El Saadany. However, malignant tumors can disguise themselves to avoid detection. “Immunotherapy makes it possible to lift this disguise so that the immune system can attack the tumor again.”

A second breakthrough is personalized therapy. While chemotherapy affects all rapidly dividing cells, personalized therapy targets specific molecular characteristics of the tumor cells. “Researchers investigate the genetic features of the tumor in order to fight it in a targeted manner,” El Saadany explains. This form of treatment is highly effective and comes with fewer side effects.

Why immunotherapies don’t work for all patients remains a key question in cancer research. “With lung cancer, it’s actually known that smokers tend to respond better to immunotherapy than non-smokers,” reports El Saadany. In a study, he examined whether this effect also appears in other types of cancer such as skin, kidney, or esophageal cancer. However, his analysis of 700 patients from Switzerland and Austria delivered an unexpected result: no clear difference in the effectiveness of immunotherapy between smokers and non-smokers could be found – not even in lung cancer. “That surprised me, because until now, it was considered well-established that smokers respond better to this therapy.” Since the number of patients in the study was limited, El Saadany is now continuing to pursue this question. A research stay at the renowned

Princess Margaret Cancer Centre in Toronto, Canada, is expected to help generate more accurate insights with larger datasets.

Despite all progress, cancer remains one of the deadliest diseases worldwide. But El Saadany sees research as a vital source of hope. His goal is to continue advancing oncology and to find new ways to treat cancer. “The most important thing is to give patients hope.”

Tämer El Saadany and Daniela Heinen

Tumor Center at the Cantonal Hospital of Graubünden

The Tumor Center at the Cantonal Hospital of Graubünden, led by Professor Roger von Moos, stands for certified top-tier medicine, clinical research, and the promotion of young talent. It offers patients, their families, and referring physicians coordinated, high-level cancer care close to home. www.ksgg.ch



Tämer El Saadany
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