Maeve Lowery, newly appointed Professor of Translational Cancer Medicine (2015) in Trinity, is explaining why she left a dream job in the Sloan Kettering Center in New York to come back to Dublin to help establish the Trinity St James's Cancer Institute. This Institute is linking together two established structures – Trinity and St James's Hospital – into a national cancer centre delivering world-class care to patients in Ireland, while contributing to the global search for cancer cures.

The Institute will “be an umbrella joining together medics, oncology researchers in disciplines like immunology and biology, and PIs – nurses, dieticians, physiotherapists - working in patient-centred research and care” explains Professor Lowery. The Institute already exists virtually insofar as these practitioners and researchers are already working across Trinity and St James’s. The goal now is to establish the essential pathways and linkages across the various roles to facilitate discovery and speed up the transition of treatments to patients.

Professor Lowery has a dual role: as well as holding the professorship of Translational Cancer Medicine - a newly created post - she works as a medical consultant oncologist in St James’s. Her lab is located within the St James’s campus: “It’s a real joy to have a lab within walking distance of the hospital, and it’s quite unusual. It means I can move quickly from one aspect to another – I can see patients on ward rounds and then come back to the lab and focus on drug development and clinical trials.”

As part of her contract, she is also on the executive committee of the National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP), chairing the committee on cancer molecular diagnostics, which means she is “helping with strategic planning on a national level.”

She specialises in gastrointestinal cancers – of the pancreas, liver, oesophagus and stomach - and has responsibility for clinical research in that field: “I run clinical trials for patients with upper gastrointestinal cancers. In addition to that, I work on translational studies, working with patient biopsies and blood samples to identify predictors of response to treatment, and with mouse models of cancer to develop new cancer treatment strategies.”

She has a very clear idea of what the Trinity St James’s Cancer Institute should be because she is coming from a model centre of excellence. After graduating from UCD in medicine in 2003, she spent a further six years in Dublin, three of them doing sub-speciality oncology training in the Mater and St James’s, before moving to New York to take up a fellowship position in Sloan Kettering, where she subsequently remained as a researcher and medical oncology consultant. “They have

→ “Being part of a centre of excellence established for a hundred years, that’s great, of course. But having the opportunity to come back and help create something new - that’s transformative and something that in thirty years’ time you could be very proud of.”
Professor Maeve Lowery – Professor of Translational Cancer Medicine (2015)
a record of excellence in translational medicine. They’ve been doing it for years - translating key discoveries in the lab into innovative clinical trials and using patient samples to refine their treatment in a continuous cycle of improvement. That’s the gold standard of how cancer drug development should function.”

She combined her consultancy and research role with teaching. “I had a joint appointment in Cornell University, where I tutored medical students. And while Sloan Kettering had a strong medical oncology fellowship training programme for clinicians, I also enjoyed supervising post-docs in the lab, including pure scientists, from a non-clinical background. I would act as a clinical and translational research mentor to them, providing guidance on their research project from a clinical perspective.”

The “sharing of cultures” is, she says, “hugely important for innovation. When that happens you get a spark. Medical trainees should spend time in labs to better understand basic scientific research, and scientists should spend time in hospitals. It’s important to ensure that we identify key challenges facing patients in the clinic and focus translational research efforts on these areas that will really impact on patients care. The culture has to be cross-disciplinary, not silo-ed.”

The gastrointestinal cancers that she works with tend to be challenging – “often they’re aggressive cancers which don’t respond well to chemotherapy or radiotherapy. That can be challenging and humbling, but it is a privilege to spend time with these patients and their families. What balances it out personally is the ability to focus on research in addition to clinical care. The drive to make a real impact comes from our patients – they are a constant motivation to do better and really change outcomes for future patients.”

It was “the gift of protected research” in the Trinity-St James’s post that persuaded her to move from New York, where she was happily settled with her husband, a surgeon, and their son. “This was the first post of its kind in Ireland and it’s very innovative in terms of how it was created.”

She knew St James’s from her time as a trainee: “It has a long history of patient-centred high-quality care, and I knew about Trinity’s excellent research record. So I knew the fundamentals were there. With the foundations in place, the potential for success with the Trinity St James’s Cancer Institute is high.”

Her goals for the next few years are first, to invest in expanding availability of cancer clinical trials. “We want to take this up a level. Eventually we want 10 percent of our patients to go on clinical trials. That’s an ambitious figure but it’s what patients want, and deserve.”

Secondly, the Institute is looking for accreditation from the OECD, the European body that regulates cancer institutes. “We’re already a member of the OECD, we’re working towards accreditation as a comprehensive cancer centre and eventually becoming a fully integrated cancer centre combining clinical care, research and education in one purpose built facility.”

To deliver on its high ambition, the Trinity St James’s Cancer Institute will need investment. It has been chosen as one of the flagship projects in the college’s philanthropic campaign, which is launching in 2019.

“The treatment of cancer is changing week by week. We have to be flexible and adaptive, leverage what we already have, and aim high. I believe the Institute can make a big impact on care of Irish cancer patients within five years.”
Professor Maeve Lowery – Professor of Translational Cancer Medicine (2015)
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