

Inside *the* Institute

Over coffee, a research collaboration is born

In late 2013, a casual meeting between two Dana-Farber researchers working in different fields led to a new collaboration that could help advance treatments for esophageal cancer.

TargetCancer Foundation – a Cambridge-based nonprofit that funds innovative research on neglected or understudied cancers – had suggested the meetup to connect Adam Bass, MD, of Medical Oncology, and Michael Goldberg, PhD, in the Department of Cancer Immunology and AIDS.

Bass had previously been funded separately by the foundation, and Goldberg's research in immunotherapy was known to its executive director, Jim Palma, and president, Kristen Palma Poth. As a result, Palma and Poth initiated the meeting to explore connections between Bass' research on genomic changes in esophageal cancer and Goldberg's work on cancer immunotherapy.

"We had met casually before this, but hadn't had much chance to talk science," recalls Bass, a physician/scientist who studies the genomes of gastrointestinal cancers. "So, over coffee, we began to discuss what each of us had been doing and how our interests could overlap."

Quite a bit, as it turned out. And TargetCancer Foundation gave them a two-year, \$115,000 grant to see where a collaboration might take them.

As a first step, using a collection of human esophageal cancer specimens, they decided to look for candidate targets for immunotherapies. In this work, they teamed with investigators F. Stephen Hodi, MD, and Scott Rodig, MD, PhD, of Dana-Farber's Center for Immuno-Oncology.

Immunotherapy drugs are designed to restore the natural ability of the immune system to recognize and attack cancer cells. This ability is



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hampered by molecules expressed by cancer cells that shield them from immune attack in a bid to survive. The newest drugs are designed to block the effects of those molecules, unleashing the immune system against the cancer.

"We first asked what markers [potential targets] are present in esophageal cancer cells, and what we found was unexpected," recalls Goldberg.

The data revealed an interesting therapeutic candidate, and a new clinical trial will be led by Peter Enzinger, MD, at Dana-Farber to test a potential candidate immunotherapy treatment in esophageal cancer patients.

Their findings in this increasingly common and hard-to-treat cancer have provided Bass and Goldberg with many leads to pursue, and they expect to publish some of them in the near future. Bringing them together for an informal meeting is paying off for TargetCancer Foundation – and perhaps, eventually, for esophageal cancer patients.

"What makes TargetCancer Foundation special is that they're not just giving out money but also building communities around these cancers that haven't had appropriate research attention," Bass says. ^{RS}