

## Peter Simmonds passes BTRU leadership mantle to Judy Breuer

### BTRU STAFF UPDATE

With his recent move to chilly Finland, Peter is transitioning from his role as BTRU Unit Director but will stay just as involved, visiting Oxford regularly and taking on honorary roles at the University of Turku and University College London. Judy Breuer (previously Theme 2 Lead) now holds the title of BTRU Director and is excited to step into this role, leading the BTRU to its conclusion in 2027.



**Peter Simmonds**

*I have been Director of BTRU-GEMS for the past three and a half years. This period has provided a unique and amazing opportunity to develop a new programme of transfusion microbiology research, develop new screening technologies and guide their practical application towards improved blood and transplant safety. It has also been a pleasure to work with a fantastic and dedicated team of scientists, with Romisa, our project manager and with Cassy to engage with our PPI group of donors and patients where our research really matters. It has been a privilege to participate in the training and professional development of our students through their DPhil and PhD programmes and we are all delighted by the research advances they have made and their contributions to the programme.*

*I'm moving to Turku, Finland for family reasons - my wife, Heli, is now Professor of Virology in Turku, so I'm not really retiring! I will continue to advise and interact with the BTRU-GEMS programme and colleagues in NHSBT, albeit often from the other side of the North Sea. Judy will be an excellent new Director of the BTRU and I'm sure we will continue and expand on the progress made with the programme in its final 18 months.*



**Judy Breuer**

*I am delighted to step into the director position following Peter's retirement. The BTRU has been a huge success thanks in no small part to Peter's leadership. I hope that with support from all of you, in particular Romisa, Heli and Tanya, as well as, of course, Peter, I can help pilot the project safely for its final 18 months. Many thanks to Peter for all his hard work for the past few years.*

## Remembering Sajid Hussain

***We are sad to share the news of the passing of Sajid Hussain, a beloved and valued member of our Public and Patient Involvement Team***

***By Romisa Asadi***

Sajid's input into our research was something really special. By talking so openly about his own life and experiences, he gave us a perspective we simply couldn't have found anywhere else. What he shared wasn't just useful for our research, it was real, heartfelt, and helped us see things in a completely new way. We'll always be grateful for the time and honesty he gave us.



But it wasn't only his contribution that stood out, it was the person he was. Sajid had a kind nature and a way of making everyone feel comfortable around him. His sense of humour was brilliant, always ready with a joke or a funny story that brought a smile.

Sajid also loved the simple joys in life. Give him a pack of Jaffa Cakes and some sunshine, and he was happy. He would often talk about his sunny holiday memories, and you could see the smile in his eyes when he did. Sajid made a big impact on all of us. We'll remember his kindness, his humour, and the positive energy he brought wherever he went.

## Inspiring future doctors from under-represented backgrounds

In July, Kaitlin Reid, Piya Rajendra (researchers), Nikki Fagbemi (patient partner), and Cassy Fiford met teenagers on Oxford's UNIQ programme, which offers taster lectures to high-achieving state school students from diverse and under-represented backgrounds.



We screened Nikki's film ('Why Me?') and heard from Nikki about living with an invisible illness. Students explored blood safety, PPI, research careers, and the importance of empathy in medicine.

It was a privilege to meet with such a bright, curious group to discuss the BTRU's work. We're looking forward to working with more groups in the coming year!

## To look forward to ...

We're heading to two Oxford community events this Autumn, contact Cassy if you'd like to be involved:

1. Community Health Promotion Event: Weds 19<sup>th</sup> Nov, Leys Pools and Leisure Centre, Oxford
2. Community Health Promotion Event: Weds 3<sup>rd</sup> Dec, Rose Hill Community Centre, Oxford

## Living with a Chronic, Invisible Illness: The Unseen Struggle

By Nikki Fagbemi, BTRU-GEMS Patient Contributor



Living with a chronic illness means carrying a body that doesn't always work the way it should. For some, those challenges are visible. But for many, our conditions are silent, hidden beneath the surface and with invisibility comes misunderstanding, bias, and judgement.

When people imagine disability, they often picture something they can see a wheelchair, a walking aid, a scar. But when your illness hides beneath your skin, society struggles to recognise it. Too often, we're met with scepticism "You don't look sick." That simple phrase dismisses our pain, our fatigue, our private battles. It can feel like a punishment for not fitting the narrow image of what disability is "supposed" to look like.

This bias leads to subtle, and sometimes not-so-subtle, discrimination. We face disbelief when we need accommodations. Our humanity gets questioned when we cannot meet expectations. And there's little conversation about how isolating that is the silent conditions that strip away health but leave us looking "fine" in the eyes of others.

But alongside these challenges, there are gifts. Living with an invisible illness has made me deeply empathetic. I see the quiet signs in others the way someone grips a chair, the hesitation before they stand, the flicker of pain behind a smile. I recognise them because I live them. That recognition forms a silent community, a shared strength among those whose struggles may differ in name but echo the same truths.

It has also changed how I see the world. Illness forces you to confront fragility, but in doing so, it sharpens the value of life. It teaches you the importance of presence of making the most of days when you feel well, of noticing beauty in the small things, of living fully within the limits your body sets.

Life with a chronic, invisible illness is complex. It is shaped by both the weight of judgement and the gift of empathy. My hope is that by speaking about it openly, we can move towards a society that understands disability in all its forms seen and unseen and treats every person with the humanity they deserve.

## Bridge the gap, talk to us ...



Connection and learning from each other is at the heart of our work – so why not visit our PPI stand at break times during the Annual Meeting? There'll be activities to explore what researchers and PPI contributors have in common, and create connections that bring even more meaning to the important work of the BTRU.

# A Year in the Life of a BTRU-GEMS Public and Patient Contributor

**By Steve Oliver, Patient Contributor**

The Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement (PPIE) team, under the support and direction of Cassy Fiford, have been very busy during the last year. Here are some highlights.



## WINTER WARMERS: LAB TOURS AND GROUP STRATEGY DISCUSSIONS



In December, we held our Annual meet-up at Great Ormond Street hospital and coupled this with a visit to UCL's various research and clinical laboratories. It was interesting for us to see the team using the latest technology and ask the 'naive questions' to the researchers. I enjoyed hearing how tests were being developed and the cost and complexities involved. At the team meeting the Public and Patient Involvement and Engagement strategy and action plan was updated and it set out some goals and tasks for the year.

In January, the team held a stakeholder mapping event, which showed how the work of BTRU-GEMS interacts with a wide variety of interested parties, ranging from NHSBT and decision-making members of Parliament, to blood donors and even premature babies. The difficult part is actually doing the engagement!

January also offered opportunities to join the CODONET study management team and also be involved in work around donor experiences of Hepatitis B diagnosis.

## SPRINGING FORWARD: GROWING SKILLS AND BOOSTING CODONET RECRUITMENT



Springtime kick-started with Plain English Summary (PES) training to researchers and the PPI team was involved in its development. The training was delivered with Oxford University in collaboration with other BTRUs and was formed of two parts. The first part gave clear direction about style and content for a PES. This training was followed up by putting the theory into practice (part 2) – where researchers were asked to write and submit a PES for their work. This work was reviewed by PPIE members from different units and a feedback session was held – the aim was to be constructive and improve the clarity and understanding of the summaries. Later in the year a competition was held for the summaries – and voting was undertaken to select the favourite entries.

Newsletters were produced in February and May which highlighted good work. Brenda from the PPIE team had appeared in the Christmas BBC Casualty episode – to encourage donor participation. In a later edition there had been interviews with Judy Breuer (from the theme 2 laboratories visited in December) reporting how new tests had helped save a girl's sight after acquiring an infection in the Amazon's waters.

In March, the team were asked help improve recruitment to the CODONET study and suggestions were made to improve the format of patient invitations. **Our suggestions led to impressive recruitment increases of 232%.**

In April, the PPIE group met online and Rich provided an update of work on preparing for an emergency – using marker viruses in archived samples. Piya also provided an update on emerging infections and blood safety.

## LONG SUMMER DAYS: FINDING NEW WAYS TO CONNECT



In May, we begun refreshing and updating the BTRU-GEMS website. Representatives from the PPIE team and researchers chose specific areas to work on and this work will conclude later in the year.

The first 'Science Café' was also held in May where researchers and PPI members volunteered their time. This was a very informal event where we could discuss 'anything we wanted'. The subjects included discussions around mosquito bites and ultimately how this feeds into the blood supply safety issues.

Bringing our engagement plan into action, we spoke with aspiring doctors from underprivileged backgrounds (see page 2 of the newsletter for the full story).

In July the PPIE team heard the sad news that Saj had passed away. Saj was a lovely man who was always open and friendly. His input was always warm and insightful and he will be greatly missed. This made me reflect that as patients we bring many experiences – the downside of that is we have complex and complicated medical histories.

## AUTUMN OUTLOOK: LOOKING FORWARD TO A NEW YEAR



I have greatly enjoyed working within the PPIE team and contributing to this great work from the BTRU-GEMS team; and may it continue into the next year! I am looking forward to hearing the team's progress and meeting you all at the Annual Meeting.

## Congratulations to Dr Sarah Buddle – the BTRU’s first PhD graduate



We’re proud to celebrate **Dr Sarah Buddle**, the first student to complete a PhD in the BTRU.

Sarah graduated from University College London (UCL) under the supervision of Dr Sofia Morfopoulou (primary supervisor), Dr Oscar Torres and Professor Judy Breuer.

Our hearty congratulations and best wishes to Sarah!

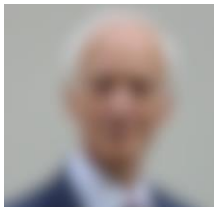
I’m really grateful to have had the opportunity to do my PhD as part of the BTRU. My research focused on metagenomics, a technique that helps detect unusual or unexpected infections from patient samples like blood.

I worked mainly on the computational side, analysing the data to uncover what might be causing illness. **One of the most rewarding projects I contributed to was investigating an outbreak of hepatitis in children; our team helped identify the involvement of a virus called AAV2.**

Huge thanks to my supervisors and colleagues at UCL for all their support - I’ve learned so much from all of you! I’m about to start a new role as a Bioinformatician in the Department of Microbiology, Virology and Infection Control at Great Ormond Street Hospital. I’m looking forward to using the skills I developed during my PhD to support patient care, and to staying connected with the BTRU team.

## Annual Meeting Brain Teaser

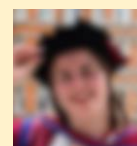
Unscramble these anagrams to reveal three famous faces in research related to Blood donation and Organ Transplantation. No Googling please!

1.  Anagram: **FAN LIFTS SANG RIBS**  
Answer: **SIR / \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ / \_ \_ \_ \_ \_**  
HINT: you would be more likely to find this person in a courtroom, than a laboratory

2.  Anagram: **CLEAR HERDS**  
Answer: **C \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ / \_ \_ \_ \_**  
HINT: African American physician, father of the blood bank with a Royal name

3.  Anagram: **HI MEDAL SHEER CLOAKS**  
Answer: **DAME / \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ / \_ \_ \_ \_ \_**  
HINT: First female professor of Medicine, founder of British Liver Trust and shares name with a famous Baker Street sleuth

**BONUS: famous in our BTRU**  
Who is this BTRU-member?



Anagram: **HENS THEN A SCAR**  
HINT: their name is strictly confidential  
Answer:

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