

EARA and CNB-CSIC host first Patient Discovery Day in Spain about long Covid

The European Animal Research Association (EARA) and EARA member National Centre for Biotechnology (CNB-CSIC) hosted the first Discovery Day in Spain, in collaboration with the patient organisation AMACOP (Madrid Long Covid Association). The event is part of the EARA's Patient Discovery project, which raises awareness among patient communities about how biomedical research, including the responsible use of animals and new approach methodologies, contributes to medical progress. Bringing together scientists and people affected by long Covid, the day offered participants first-hand insight into ongoing research while enabling researchers to hear directly from those living with the condition.

The programme began with a welcome session featuring CNB director Mario Mellado and EARA Deputy Director Nuno Miguel Gonçalves. Mellado emphasised the importance of these initiatives to bring the scientific process closer to the public and to learn from the people affected, whose experience is essential. Gonçalves introduced EARA's patient engagement project, first implemented in 2023, and emphasised the importance of giving patients a voice in discussions about the future of biomedical research and of fostering this two-way dialogue.

The programme featured contributions from Isabel Sola and Sonia Zúñiga, co-heads of the CNB-CSIC Coronavirus Research Group. Sola presented the ongoing research lines on SARS-CoV-2, as well as the recently launched line focused on long Covid. She explained how a combination of laboratory techniques, including the use of genetically altered mice, supports the study of how the virus affects the body over time, identifies mechanisms underlying persistent symptoms, and explores potential therapeutic strategies and optimised vaccines.

Addressing long Covid, Sola underlined the complexity of this condition, in which more than 200 different symptoms have been described and where not all affected people present the same ones. She also noted that around 10 % of those infected, even after mild cases, go on to develop the condition. "Our research, as basic science, seeks to understand its causes with the aim of translating that knowledge into new solutions, such as the identification of diagnostic biomarkers," she said.

Participants were then guided through CNB's animal research facilities by Ángel Naranjo, veterinarian and head of the animal facility, where they observed how mice used in research are housed and cared for. Naranjo, outlined the strict regulatory framework governing animal research and highlighted the application of the 3Rs principles — replacement, reduction and refinement — to ensure responsible and humane scientific practice. Belén Pintado, head of the Transgenesis and Genetic Editing Service, explained the challenges of developing and maintaining genetically altered mice and emphasised that this was crucial to enabling several CNB-CSIC research groups to generate their findings.

The day concluded with an informal networking session, allowing participants to exchange reflections with researchers, deepen conversations on research priorities and continue building dialogue between lived experience and scientific investigation.

"Studies tell us there are hundreds of symptoms, but patients help us understand which ones are truly dominant in real life. That allows us to prioritise the right questions and even reconsider what we analyse in our animal models based on their observations," highlighted Isabel Sola.

Representatives from AMACOP welcomed the opportunity to engage directly with researchers, noting that seeing laboratory work firsthand helped demystify the research process, previous misconceptions about animals in science, and underscored the care and ethical responsibility involved in animal research.

“Before this visit, I had a very negative opinion about animal research. But today, I leave very happy. What surprised me most was seeing the very humane treatment of the animals. I never thought it would be like this,” said Beatriz del Barrio, from AMACOP.

This first Discovery Day in Spain represents another important milestone for EARA’s Patient Discovery project. “This edition was significant for several reasons. It marked the project’s inaugural edition in Spain, with two more planned. More importantly, it clearly demonstrated the successful realisation of our goal of patient engagement: by creating a level playing field between researchers and patients, we enabled both parties to gain valuable insights and learn from one another, benefiting science and patient care. Additionally, it provided further evidence that people are not inherently opposed to animal research when presented in a well-contextualised manner,” stated Nuno Miguel Gonçalves.

This partnership showcased CNB-CSIC and EARA’s shared mission to promote transparency, encourage informed dialogue and connect scientific research with patient experience.