Clinical research in oncology typically requires large-scale, multi-institutional networks of hospitals — and for breast cancer trials in Southern Europe, coordinating those studies often falls to SOLTI, a non-profit organization with more than 20 years of experience in running clinical investigations in Spain, Portugal, France and Italy. SOLTI is always looking to the future, whether it’s through scientific advances that could change cancer care or through annual scholarships that help train the next generation of physician-scientists. Dr. Aleix Prat, head of medical oncology at the Hospital Clinic in Barcelona and the scientific committee coordinator for SOLTI, discusses why such an international collaboration is needed to make progress in the treatment of breast cancer.

Q: What does SOLTI enable that wouldn’t be possible without such a network?

Breast cancer is not one disease. There are many different subtypes — at least four and probably more — and as we’re running more complex trials and we’re selecting patients based on the molecular characteristics of their tumors, we need to join forces to find patients or we’re just not going to be able to run any trials. Our main objective is to bring together different specialists from approximately 60 hospitals who are involved in the treatment of breast cancer. We have them work closely with our SOLTI professionals, who have diverse backgrounds and roles in medical, scientific, operational, and financial affairs. And then we meet and think about new ways to improve patient outcomes. In this way, SOLTI acts as a sort of filter of ideas, so we only run the best trials that are going to make a difference in the lives of breast cancer patients.

Q: What’s an example of a SOLTI trial that has changed clinical practice?

Perhaps the best example of SOLTI’s impact can be seen today in the treatment of women with HER2-positive breast cancer. SOLTI played a major role in the clinical trials that led to approval of the HER2-targeting drug Herceptin. This is probably what the network is best known for today.

Q: What makes SOLTI unique from other kinds of cancer trial networks?

At least one feature that’s different about SOLTI is the fact that it integrates a lot of translational science behind our clinical trials. So, when doctors run a trial, the question is usually: Does the drug or treatment work? But at SOLTI, we always try to gather samples, either from the tumor or from the blood, and then run scientific studies so we can advance our understanding of the disease by, for example, identifying additional biomarkers that will help us make better treatment decisions. We have a very good network of labs with the expertise to make sure this happens. SOLTI is also very open and inviting. We have a scientific committee and anybody can bring us an idea. If we like the idea, we try to collaborate either with pharmaceutical companies or with other academic cooperative groups to get that trial funded and off the ground. It’s only by uniting our efforts that we’ll be able to address unmet medical needs for our patients.

Q: You lead a translational genomics lab at the August Pi i Sunyer Biomedical Research Institute (IDIBAPS) as well a medical oncology department at a major Spanish hospital. Why did you want to take on the job coordinating SOLTI’s scientific initiatives as well?

Too often, the oncology community is really split between physicians on the one side and researchers on the other, and we need to find this place in the middle where we both see patients and, at the same time, go to the lab to understand what’s happening in their disease. I’m deeply committed to this approach and I’d like to see more people enter this kind of translational research paradigm. SOLTI can help make that happen, and this position allows me to move that forward. Plus, the fact that I can start with an initial idea from the clinic, run a clinical trial and then get new scientific insights, for me, is extremely rewarding, because it means we’re making progress.

Q: How does SOLTI help with career development for young clinicians who are interested in breast cancer research?

This is very important for us. We need new people with new expertise, so it’s critical to attract young investigators. Our commitment to seeding the future of breast cancer research led us to launch the Young Researchers Program more than two years ago. This program has two parts: First, there are workshops that we organize where we try to teach the basics of running a clinical trial — the statistics, the ethics, even legal issues. And then we have a one-year grant in which we finance the salary of an early-career investigator who has just finished a fellowship in medical oncology, giving that person the opportunity to go work in one of the big research hospitals in Spain and be a part of the SOLTI team. It’s not easy now for clinicians to enter research, and I think SOLTI can really help these young physicians understand how clinical research operates, with mentoring from many leading experts.

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Q: Do you see this kind of training paying off?

Absolutely. The Young Researchers Program has proven to be a great way to attract these future investigators, get to know them, understand their motivations and start a relationship. Nowadays, we’re seeing that many of SOLTI’s new members are quite young, and this is reflected even on the scientific committee where the majority is below the age of 45. I’m only 37! I think it’s great. We need to make sure that these young medical oncologists do research because, if not, it’s going to be difficult to move forward in this field.
Our **Talent program** is committed to the future of breast cancer research by supporting **early-career investigators**, providing them with a comprehensive training program in clinical research:

- **Personalized career development for one year**, including:
  - Rotation in a hospital from our network under the mentorship of a senior SOLTI investigator.
  - **Hands-on experience in clinical protocol development & study conduct in our headquarters office.**
  - **Access to SOLTI** educational events, including workshops in clinical trial design & biostatistics.
  - **Attendance to an international professional conference.**
  - **Stipend** to cover living expenses.

SOLTI is a non-profit organization with **more than 20 years of experience** in conducting **innovative clinical & translational studies** in the field of **breast cancer research**.