

Guidance on setting-up and running a Science Café: Reflections from the Cancer Research UK Imperial Centre Science Café

This guide was developed by Kelly Gleason, Lead Nurse at the [Cancer Research UK Imperial Centre](#) (CRUK, ICL) to provide practical guidance on setting up and running a Science Café. Throughout the guidance Kelly reflects on, and shares learning, regarding her own experience setting up a Science Café for Cancer within the CRUK centre to help support others in undertaking a Science Café for their Team/Department/Centre.

Setting the intention for the Science Café

Setting clear intentions for the Science Café is critical. You may wish to ask yourself:

- Why am I creating this science café platform?
- What is the purpose of the platform?
- What am I trying to achieve?

Creating a safe environment

It is important to maintain an environment that supports both the speaker and the attendee. You want a safe space that fosters learning about each other.

- Choose an appropriate venue:
 - Is the venue accessible?
 - Is the venue inviting to attendees and does it provide a relaxed and comfortable setting?
- Ensure adequate time for questions and discussion following researchers' presentations
- You can dedicate one person to keep an eye on the door and welcome late comers. This person can also observe the room and approach anyone who seems upset during or after the presentations and offer support.
- It is nice, when it is possible, to offer light catering to follow the presentations and discussion. This gives attendees the opportunity to network and engage in more informal discussions with speakers.

For the Imperial Cancer Research UK Centre Science Café, I chose to host the events at [Maggie's West London](#), a charity that provides support and information to anyone affected by cancer. Maggie's is a beautiful award-winning space that makes everyone who walks through their door feel more at ease and relaxed.

At Imperial we are very fortunate to have a Maggie's centre on our doorstep. It was chosen as I wanted events to take place in a warm and patient friendly environment not a cold academic seminar room or lecture theatre. I wanted a place that supported a more informal atmosphere that helped put everyone in the room at ease. The room where the science cafés are held is like a large living room with sofas and comfortable chairs. A projector is available when slides are used; slides are simply projected onto a bare wall giving the event a homey feel.

Maggie's is also easily accessible by wheelchair.

Time of day

When setting an appropriate time of day to run a Science Café, ask the people who are your target audience, what time of day they would prefer to attend such an event.

For the Imperial Cancer Research UK Centre Science Café, we chose to host the events from 18:30 until 19:30 or 20:00 depending on the number of speakers at the event. This time of day was chosen by the public involvement group as it allowed those who work to travel to the event. It was also not too late for people dealing with health issues who did not like to be out late or travel in the dark.

Duration and frequency of events

The duration of events will depend on how many speakers you have and the format for your session, however 1 to 1.5 hours is usually the perfect length for people to stay focused without feeling too overwhelmed with information.

It's important to keep speakers to their allotted time to allow sufficient time for discussion and questions. This platform was about creating space for dialogue, therefore, protecting time for open discussion is important.

In terms of frequency, this will be dependent on your capacity to organise events and the needs of your researchers and target audience.

For the Imperial Cancer Research UK Centre Science Café, I found that one hour was the perfect length for our session. I also found that offering between five to six events per year worked well. This was frequent enough to feel that they were part of the research infrastructure but not too often so that events felt special which encouraged attendance.

Topics and speakers

When determining topics and speakers, it is helpful to reach out to people in your target audience. Ask them what they would like to learn about in your area of research. You may want to showcase the areas of research expertise within your team(s) or organisation. You could also design a series of cafés around a particular theme.

In the beginning for the Imperial Cancer Research UK Centre Science Café, I chose topics to showcase the areas of research expertise at Imperial to offer attendees an overview of our research. I also asked our public involvement group what they would like to learn about and then I found speakers from that field.

One year I chose a theme and designed a series of cafes around that specific theme. This provided new approach to organising the cafes which offered a refreshing approach after almost a decade of coordinating these events.

Our events showcased one speaker and sometimes two. If you have two speakers, it is nice to have them speak on a similar topic. This is also a good way to introduce a speaker from another discipline other than medicine. For example, you might as an oncologist and a physicist to present on radiotherapy research or a surgeon and an engineer working on lymphedema research would be another complementary pairing on a shared topic.

Style of presentations

Explaining complex ideas or data to a lay audience

- Slides can be helpful when they are not too busy, or they are helping to explain complex data or idea – however they are not necessary. Some speakers have simply sat on a stool and conveyed very clearly a very complex area of research such as artificial intelligence.
- Speakers need to be prepared to slow down and take the time to explain things in simple terms. This will help make the discussion that follows more valuable.
- The use of symbols and analogies can help people better understand complex information.

For some scientists, speaking to a lay audience which often includes patients can be daunting. If your speaker raises concerns, consider inviting a relevant clinician to attend the session, so they can provide support to the speaker and advice to attendees if a clinical question is raised or if attendees are seeking advice about their diagnosis, disease management or treatment.

Format of the Science Café

Depending on the number of speakers and the topic, you may wish to have a panel discussion rather than a Q&A format. Panel discussions are a good way to present different perspectives on a given topic. This style of science café often generates a lively discussion.

Due to the sensitive nature of some of the research areas being discussed at the Imperial Cancer Research UK Centre Science Café, some speakers voiced concerns about saying something that may upset a patient. Others worries that their research was not advanced enough to offer hope to anyone with a cancer diagnosis.

Some speakers shared concerns about not having the knowledge or credentials to answer clinical questions. It is for this reason; I asked a clinician to attend when a scientist presented to help the scientist feel more at ease. The clinician in these situations acted as both support and translator. or after a presentation. It is important to be aware of this and offer any support they may need.

Ensure you have the right technology available

It is important to note that if presenters have slides, you will need a projector but remember that projectors are portable and can easily be set up in a space if there is a bare wall to project the slides.

Size of group

There is no set number of attendees required for a Science Café. Different size groups offer different types of discussions.

From the Imperial Cancer Research UK Centre Science Café, I have learnt that different sized groups change the feel and dynamic of the event but that does not seem affect the quality of the discussion at the event. In larger groups, there can be more listening by some audience members, with only enough time for some to ask questions whereas in smaller groups more people can contribute to the discussion and ask questions. I have found that smaller groups create more intimate conversation around the topic.

Advertising

When advertising your Science Café event, think about your intention first, and then choose your method(s) of advertising to reflect the group(s) you are targeting for each event. This could include:

- Putting up posters in your local centres or clinics
- Sharing to relevant groups on social media
- Reaching out to existing mailing lists
- Talk to your colleagues about events
- Using online platforms such as [VOICE](#)

For the Imperial Cancer Research UK Centre Science Café, I initially advertised the cafes in our cancer clinics and wards as well as our local Maggie's Centre using posters with details of the event. Members of research teams shared the events by word of mouth with NHS colleagues and their patients. During the café series on personalisation, I expanded our advertising through [VOICE](#), a public facing digital platform at Imperial, and through Surgery & Cancer email distribution lists. These advertising efforts were successful as every new avenue tested brought a new demographic to events

How might a science café platform be useful in your area?

As our science café evolved, it has been useful in the following ways:

- It has helped the public learn about more about research.
- It has given researchers the opportunity to communicate their work to a lay audience and share their results with the public.
- It has provided training opportunities for students to learn to communicate science to a lay audience and involve the public in research as a core element of good research practice.
- It has been used as a training programme for public involvement contributors.
- It has helped us recruit new members to our public involvement group.
- It helped us bridge the gap between NHS service and research in the NHS
- It has allowed us to showcase unlikely suspects interested in cancer research such as mathematicians, physicists, and engineers.

A few things you might want to think about before starting you own science café...

- A science café platform can be an important part of the research infrastructure that shapes the research culture in your area, however, it is helpful if you can identify a dedicated individual who understands the value of such a platform and how it can influence research culture in a positive way.
- It is helpful to have someone look after this space with care and attention but also dedication and determination in order to establish a café platform and imbed it in the research infrastructure of your organisation. It helps if this individual is well networked and has access to researchers both in the clinic and in the lab. The more access they have to patients, the public, clinicians, and scientists, the easier it will be for them to create events that make the experience a positive for one for everyone involved.
- I have also learned that formal evaluation of events on an ongoing basis would help to evolve the platform and keep it fresh and relevant to the changing needs of audience and your researchers.

For further information:

Email: k.gleason@imperial.ac.uk

Website: <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/cancer-research-uk-imperial-centre>

Twitter: @imperialCR_UK