The second World Parkinson Congress took place at the Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre in Glasgow from the 28 September to 1 October, in a venue made famous by the likeness of its main hall to a metal armadillo. The World Parkinson Congress brings together several thousand researchers, clinicians, care givers and patients, providing a distinct forum where all the people studying and impacted by Parkinson’s can exchange experiences, ideas and the latest research. This is by no means an easy task, as the different constituencies have very different expectations of a conference such as this but, having attended both of the Congresses held to date (the last one was in Washington DC in 2006), I have been impressed by how well the WPC achieves this.

The Congress, co-chaired by Andrew Lees (UCL Institute of Neurology, London UK) and Stanley Fahn (Columbia University, New York USA) opened, on the Tuesday, with a plenary session that emphasised the range of participants at the meeting. This included an introduction by Gavin Hastings, former captain of the Scottish and British Lions rugby teams, during which he gave a touching description of his wife developing Parkinson’s, and his father and brother both suffering and impacted by Parkinson’s.

On to the conference itself and, as is clear following a cursory glance at the academic literature over the last 12 months, we live in exciting times with regard to research into the genetic and cellular basis of Parkinson’s, with major advances occurring, most notably in the genetic definition of this disorder. This was underlined by a presentation from Haydeh Payami (Wadsworth Center, New York USA) following on from her recent Nature Genetics paper (Hamza et alia) describing a genome wide association study for idiopathic Parkinson’s disease. Her team are interrogating the data generated for this study and claim to have discovered a possible gene locus for the protective impact of caffeine in some Parkinson’s patients. Although this was very much a preliminary report, and much more work is needed to confirm the finding, it offered an intriguing glimpse of what pharmacogenetics can offer.

A highlight of the first morning was a superb presentation by David Iverson, a journalist from the USA) opened, on the Tuesday, with a plenary session that emphasised the range of participants at the meeting. This included an introduction by Gavin Hastings, former captain of the Scottish and British Lions rugby teams, during which he gave a touching description of his wife developing Parkinson’s, and his father and brother both suffering and impacted by Parkinson’s.

Following this, a talk by Dr. Andrew Lees, a Parkinson’s researcher and clinician, drew attention to the important role played by the central nervous system in the regulation of movement. He discussed the mechanisms by which dopamine neurons in the brain control movement and how their dysfunction in Parkinson’s disease leads to the symptoms of tremor, rigidity, and akinesia.

Another talk by Dr. Susan Bressman, a neurologist from the Beth Israel Medical Center in New York, focused on the genetic basis of Parkinson’s disease and the role of the LRRK2 gene. She highlighted the importance of understanding the genetic causes of this disorder to develop targeted therapies.

The Congress provided a very useful forum for researchers to present their latest findings and for clinicians and patients to learn about the latest advancements in Parkinson’s disease treatment. The Congress also featured an extensive exhibition hall where companies and non-profit organizations could showcase their products and services.

In summary, the World Parkinson Congress was a landmark event that brought together researchers, clinicians, and patients to share their experiences and ideas. It was particularly timely presentations as the FDA have just licensed the first stem cell trial in humans, to be carried out on spinal cord injury patients (see http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-11517680), and it is only a matter of time before similar approaches are applied to neurodegenerative diseases such as Parkinson’s.

In addition to the research and patient news, there was a strong presence from the leading charities involved in funding research into Parkinson’s and patient support groups. Parkinson’s UK, The Michael J Fox Foundation, and the Cure Parkinson’s Trust all had very good and informative stalls. As for the research, the Congress provided a very useful forum for discovering where the charities are focusing their efforts and what funding mechanisms are available.

In conclusion, the World Parkinson Congress was an informative and engaging event that offered a glimpse into the latest advancements in Parkinson’s disease research. It was clear that much work still needs to be done to fully understand the causes and treatments for this disease, but the continued efforts of the researchers, clinicians, care givers and patients are making significant progress.