The ESGCT Spring School 2026, Coimbra (Portugal)

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Thanks to the generous support of the GSCN, I had the opportunity to attend the ESGCT Spring School 2026 in Coimbra, Portugal. During four intensive days, early-career researchers from across Europe and beyond came together to discuss current developments in gene and cell therapy, exchange ideas, and connect with experts in the field. For me, the historic university city of Coimbra provided a very special and inspiring setting for this meeting.

From the first day on, it became clear that the Spring School was much more than a traditional lecture series. In addition to the scientific talks, the program included workshops on scientific writing, public engagement, intellectual property, and presentation skills. I particularly appreciated the strong focus on interaction between participants and faculty members. The “Break the Ice Dinner” was a great opportunity to meet other participants in an informal setting and to start conversations that continued throughout the following days. I also enjoyed how local traditions were included in the program, especially the musical performances by Coimbra’s student “Tuna” groups, which contributed to the welcoming atmosphere.

The scientific program covered many different aspects of modern gene and cell therapy. One of the highlights for me was Luigi Naldini’s keynote lecture, in which he gave an impressive overview of the development of hematopoietic gene therapies from basic research to clinical application. Hildegard Büning’s presentation on AAV biology and vector engineering was also particularly interesting, as it provided valuable insights into the optimization of viral delivery systems and their translational potential. Another presentation that stayed with me was given by Špela Miroševič, who shared the perspective of a parent involved in the development of a gene therapy for her son. Her talk was very moving and clearly showed how directly research in this field can affect patients and their families.

Other sessions focused on viral and non-viral vector systems, CRISPR/Cas-based genome editing, epigenetic editing, and preclinical as well as clinical applications of gene therapy. I was especially interested in Toni Cathomen’s discussion of off-target effects in genome editing and João Nuno Moreira’s presentation on delivery strategies for nucleic acid therapeutics. The broader discussions on the development of Advanced Therapy Medicinal Products were also very valuable, particularly with regard to regulatory and translational challenges.

Beyond the lectures, the direct exchange with the invited speakers was particularly helpful. The “Meet the Expert” sessions offered the chance to discuss not only scientific topics, but also questions about career development, publication strategies, and the challenges of working in academia. These conversations provided useful perspectives for my own research project and future career planning.

The interaction with the other participants was another important part of the Spring School. The event brought together young scientists from different countries and scientific backgrounds, creating a very open and collaborative atmosphere. The social events, the guided tour through Coimbra, and the many informal conversations outside the official program helped to build new international connections and explore potential future collaborations.

Overall, attending the ESGCT Spring School 2026 was a very valuable and inspiring experience. It broadened my understanding of current developments in gene and cell therapy, gave me useful input for my own work, and helped me expand my international professional network. I am sincerely grateful to the GSCN for making my participation in this excellent event possible.

Sincerely,
Hassan Toufaili