

Interview with Dr. Kasey Coutts: Advancing Research in Rare Melanomas

Kasey Coutts, PhD, specializes in mucosal melanoma, a rare melanoma subtype.

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This blog is by Precious Ngosse at Melanoma Research Alliance

The Melanoma Research Alliance (MRA) recently interviewed Kasey Coutts, PhD, Assistant Professor and Co-Director of the [CU Center for Rare Melanomas](#) at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, where she specializes in [mucosal melanoma](#), a rare melanoma subtype that occurs in the mucosal linings of different tissues in the body. We spoke with her to gain insight into her experience studying rare melanomas and the value of accessibility to preclinical models.

A Newer Focus

Dr. Coutts began her PhD training at the University of Colorado Boulder, where she studied cutaneous melanoma, the most common and widely recognized form of the disease. After completing both her PhD and postdoctoral fellowship, she pursued translational research at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus and became involved with the campus' biorepository, a facility that collects, processes, and stores biological samples like DNA, blood, tissue, and cells, for laboratory research.

Dr. Coutts recalls one day in the clinic, when a colleague brought up in conversation a unique case of mucosal melanoma, a rare melanoma subtype that Dr. Coutts had never encountered before, despite a decade of experience in the field at that point. Intrigued, she began exploring the landscape of rare melanomas, eventually making mucosal melanoma her new research focus.

Spreading awareness of the rare melanoma subtypes, such as [acral](#), mucosal, and [uveal](#), is critical—not just to the general public but also within the research community. Rare melanomas have distinct genetic profiles compared to cutaneous melanoma, and due to their typical locations, are often detected at more advanced stages. This late diagnosis leads to poorer prognoses and fewer effective treatment options. Increasing visibility and awareness is an essential step in addressing these gaps and encouraging new avenues of investigation.

The Utility of Preclinical Models

When studying common cancers, researchers typically have ready access to clinical samples. Rare cancers, however, are more difficult to study due to limited sample availability, slowing research progress. Cell lines, or populations of cells maintained in cell cultures, can provide a solution, but creating them is challenging. As Dr. Coutts shared:

“One struggle is being able to develop cell lines and animal models from these rare melanomas - acral, mucosal, and even uveal... it’s an ongoing barrier for us.”

This barrier can be overcome through collaboration, which is the foundation of MRA’s [rare melanoma catalogs](#). These catalogs are well-characterized resources of cell lines and patient-derived xenograft (PDX) animal models that enable investigators to share their models and accelerate scientific discovery. In PDXs, scientists take a small portion of a tumor and implant it into an animal, usually a mouse, to study the cancer in a living system.

Since the launch of the rare melanoma catalogs on MRA’s website in 2021, Dr. Coutts has been a key contributor. Thanks to her involvement, she and her lab have facilitated 40 material transfer agreements (MTAs) within the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Spain, and the Netherlands distributing cell lines and PDX models to researchers, providing them with the tools to study rare melanomas. This level of sharing is significant, reflecting not only a growing global interest in rare melanomas but also how resources like the MRA’s model catalogs can drive progress in a field that has historically faced barriers.

The Future of the Field

Despite the existing knowledge gaps between common and rare melanomas, Dr. Coutts is optimistic about the future. She anticipates an expansion of data over the next decade with new rare melanoma patient models that go beyond our understanding of the genome. Currently, there is a lack of broad patient sample databases for acral, mucosal, and uveal melanomas and the hope is that this will change.

Comprehensive databases are critical to our understanding of cancer at the molecular level. They help classify tumor subtypes, identify key mutations, and inform treatment strategies. Broad analyses of rare melanoma patient samples have only begun to occur in recent years, and progress has been limited by the difficulty of sharing patient specimens and the scarcity of available repositories.

A growth of data will pave the way for an emergence of new therapeutic strategies.

Her faith in the field speaks volumes about the amount of potential and possibility that this research holds.

A Message to Patients

In addition to her work in the lab, Dr. Coutts remains committed to patient advocacy. She encourages the public to prioritize routine skin checks, explaining that even small or very early melanomas can be dangerous due to their ability to quickly spread.

Her passion is evidently driven by not just scientific inquiry but by a deep sense of responsibility toward those most affected. Her connection with patient advocacy groups has helped shape her approach, emphasizing that although rare melanoma patients represent a small portion of the cancer population, “each diagnosis is a person with a life and a family.”

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<http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/blog/interview-dr-kasey-couts-advancing-research-rare-melanomas>