

## Theatre

### Taking colonoscopies to the stage at the Edinburgh Fringe

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the world's largest performing arts event, is no stranger to hosting unusual performances on its stages, from stand-up comedians and amateur theatre companies to circus shows and magic acts. But not many Fringe shows over its 76-year history have recreated a colonoscopy. This recreation was just one of the hilarious yet educational aspects of *So, tell me about your bowels...*, a Fringe show performed by honorary consultant gastroenterologist Gwo-tzer Ho and clinical research fellow Rebecca Hall, both from the Gut Research Unit at the University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK. Their show was part of the Cabaret of Dangerous Ideas, a programme that has brought together academics from Edinburgh's four universities for the past 11 years to share details of their research with the public using many of the elements of stand-up comedy. The "dangerous idea" at the heart of their presentation was to include patients with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) in their research, particularly through their study of patient-reported outcomes of overall wellbeing. As part of the research, the unit is working with the charity Crohn's & Colitis UK to conduct the largest survey of wellbeing among patients with IBD using a validated IBD questionnaire, targeting 5000 responses.

To recreate a colonoscopy on stage, Ho and Hall called on the services of stand-up comedian Susan Morrison, who is one of the compères for the Cabaret of Dangerous Ideas. Morrison joined them on stage wearing a tabard with see-through plastic tubing attached to its front, and Ho wielded a colonoscope to show the audience how he would examine her colon. The demonstration gave the packed crowd in the studio venue at The Stand Comedy Club's New Town Theatre an insight into how Ho and his colleagues would examine patients. As well as recreating the colonoscopy, Ho and Hall used a series of other visual aids to tell the audience about the diagnosis and treatment of IBD. To an oversized board showing the Bristol stool chart, Hall attached a series of chocolate bars, starting with Maltesers for type 1, moving through Picnic, Double Decker, Galaxy Ripple, homemade chocolate-covered marshmallow, and a bashed Flake, before ending with hot chocolate for type 7. Hall also emptied a giant bag full of cuddly toys out onto the stage to represent the trillions of bacteria living inside the human gut.

The large size of the crowd demonstrated the public's increasing interest in their gut health; although the

two researchers only spoke for about 20 min, there was no shortage of questions from the audience to fill up the remainder of the 1 h session. Members of the public quizzed the academics on the early results of their research into the wellbeing of patients with IBD and Hall explained that many people were reporting low energy levels and fatigue, even after their treatment had reduced their inflammation. Another question focused on the psychological impact of being diagnosed with a long-term health condition, such as IBD, and whether this impact was the cause of such fatigue. "It's a very interesting question because you come to a situation where you ask, is it the chicken or the egg?" replied Ho. He also highlighted the growing amount of data about the gut-brain axis. "You've not only got the gut telling the brain what's happening, but the brain communicates really well with the gut, not even from just motility, but in inflammation."

During both their talk and the ensuing questions and answers session with the audience, Ho and Hall reiterated their desire for the public to become involved in their research, especially around the wider impact of IBD on general wellbeing and quality of life. Hall explained that the results from the questionnaire would help to guide the next steps for the unit's work in its laboratory, looking at treatments or monitoring. "From a scientific perspective, we can ask, is there a molecular signal, a change in your gut bacteria, for example, or the way your immune cells work or how you metabolise that could explain why symptoms persist long after gut inflammation has gone away", explained Ho. "If we have that information then we can build or find better treatments aimed towards making the patient—not the test—better. Using that same approach means we can find new tests that can measure the treatment success based on the overall wellbeing rather than the simple tests that we do now." Hall added: "We want to take the whole person and not just look at their bowels but look at the entire person all together, and see where we go from there." Running an innovative public engagement event as part of the Cabaret of Dangerous Ideas at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe is part of that process—time will tell whether it also encourages more members of the public to take part in their research.

Peter Ranscombe



*So, tell me about your bowels...* was hosted by Susan Morrison and performed by Gwo-tzer Ho and Rebecca Hall at The Stand Comedy Club's New Town Theatre, Edinburgh Festival Fringe, Edinburgh, UK, on Aug 15, 2023

For more on *So, tell me about your bowels...* see <https://www.thestand.co.uk/performance/15633/so-tell-me-about-your-bowels/20230815/fringe>

For more on the University of Edinburgh's Gut Research Unit and the IBD questionnaire see <https://www.ed.ac.uk/inflammation-research/research/gut-research-unit>



