Sarcoma UK
Press Release
No.10 reception marks landmark attempt at unravelling one of cancer’s biggest mysteries

For immediate release

The secrets of one of the most aggressive but least understood type of cancers, sarcoma, are set to be unveiled in a major new research programme launched at No.10 yesterday evening by Sarcoma UK, the national bone and soft tissue charity.

Sarcoma UK’s new genomics research programme aims to bring together the top minds in cancer research to find answers to the most fundamental questions about sarcoma. Relatively little is known about the cancer that is diagnosed in 15 people a day in the UK, and from which David Cameron’s former principle private secretary, Chris Martin, sadly passed away in November 2015.

Guests keen to support the launch at No.10 included the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Matt Hancock, BBC journalist and broadcaster Zoe Conway, who was married to Chris Martin, broadcaster and columnist Sali Hughes and several of the top sarcoma researchers in the UK.

Like other cancers, sarcoma is caused by changes in the genetic code, similar to spelling errors in the instructions for a person’s genetic make-up. It can affect any part of the body, on the inside or externally, including the muscle, bone or blood vessels. As a result, sarcoma can be hard to diagnose, especially if it occurs internally in the body, where it can grow unnoticed. Currently the five-year survival rate for sarcoma in the UK is 55%.

It is hoped that the drive for further sarcoma genomics research will lead to better and more targeted treatments for sarcoma, as there are currently limited treatment options beyond surgery. As a cancer that accounts for 1.3% of all cancer cases in the UK, it does not currently receive that same proportion of research funding.

Prime Minister Theresa May said: “All of us know someone who has experienced the devastating impacts of cancer, and Sarcoma UK has a profound connection with many at Downing Street.

“I’m honoured to support their vital work to shine a light on this rare form of cancer and improve the treatment available – transforming the lives of thousands of sufferers and their families.

“Improving early cancer detection and diagnosis is a key part of our long term plan for the NHS, which is one reason why research programmes such as these are so important.”

On the day that also saw the launch of NHS England’s sarcoma service specification, guidelines that will help improve the care sarcoma patients in England receive, Matt Hancock said: “I am delighted to announce that last night, we published the first sarcoma service specification. It’s the first time that all sarcoma services will be commissioned to deliver the same level of care to patients across England. This government is making sure that a sarcoma patient will be diagnosed correctly and earlier, put onto
the right pathway sooner, and will receive the best treatment by the people with the experience and expertise to do so.”

Richard Davidson, Chief Executive of Sarcoma UK, said: “Sarcoma is a neglected cancer when it comes to research. There’s so much we still don’t know about it, why it develops and how it spreads. It brings home why our relationship with No.10, which stemmed from Chris Martin’s untimely death, is so important. We are committed to fill the treatment vacuum for sarcoma which is devastating for patients and their families.”

At the start of 2019, Sarcoma UK invested a quarter of a million pounds in a piece of genomics research, involving 35 scientific experts from across the UK who are investigating 1,000 genetic samples collected from the 100,000 Genomes Project. Led by Professor Adrienne Flanagan from the UCL Cancer Institute, the Sarcoma Genomics England Clinical Interpretation Partnership (GeCIP) is investigating and cataloguing the breadth of variation in genetic mutations in sarcoma for the very first time. The data will also give researchers a valuable insight into how sarcoma develops resistance to drugs and treatments. Sarcoma UK aims to fund more projects like this through the genomics research programme in the coming years.

Any new understanding of the disease will be used to drive improvements in personalised treatments and targeted therapies for patients, and ultimately increase the chances of surviving sarcoma in the long term.

Notes to editors
For further information, please contact Bevis Man, Communications Director at Sarcoma UK: bevis.man@sarcoma.org.uk or 07931 254 697.

Attached image, from left to right: Matt Hancock, Dr Nischalan Pillay (UCL Cancer Institute), Zoe Conway and Richard Davidson (CEO of Sarcoma UK)

About Sarcoma UK
Sarcoma UK is a national charity that funds vital research, offers support for anyone affected by sarcoma cancer and campaigns for better treatments. It is one of the largest funders of sarcoma research in the UK, having invested more than £2.4 million into sarcoma research to date, and was No.10’s charity of the year in 2016-17. sarcoma.org.uk

About sarcoma
- Sarcoma is cancer of the bone and soft tissue. It is more common than previously thought, with 5345 people diagnosed with sarcoma cancer in the UK in 2015.
- There are three main types of sarcoma: soft tissue sarcoma, bone sarcoma and gastrointestinal stromal tumours (GIST).
- Sarcoma diagnoses now make up about 1.3% of all cancer diagnoses in the UK.
- The majority of people are diagnosed when their sarcoma is about the size of a large tin of baked beans (10cm).
- Almost eight in 10 people (78%) diagnosed with sarcoma in the UK will live up to a year.
• The five-year survival rate for sarcoma is 55%.
• Awareness of sarcoma is low. According to a YouGov poll conducted in April 2019, 75% of people in the UK do not know or are not sure what sarcoma is.

The NHS and cancer care

• Over the last two years NHS England has invested £200 million to find ways to diagnose cancer earlier and improve care for those living with cancer.
• As part of the Long Term Plan for the NHS, the government is improving cancer screening and diagnosis. Over the next decade we will detect 75 per cent of cancers in the early stages, so 55,000 more people a year will live for at least five years following a diagnosis.