

Oncologists call for co-ordinated policies to tackle cancer

Cancer is a major cause of ill health within the EU, yet co-ordinated attempts to tackle it have been thin on the ground until now. At a dinner workshop at the European Health Forum Gastein*, speakers from the European CanCer Organisation (ECCO), set out their plans to tackle this anomaly and to promote collaborative action between all players in the field of oncology – patients, scientists, doctors, and carers.

“It is essential that we all contribute to help strengthen European policy on cancer and ensure that it takes its rightful place in the EU health and research policy agenda. Cancer is the second most common cause of death in the EU, accounting for two out of every ten deaths in women and three out of every ten deaths in men, and 3.2 million EU citizens diagnosed each year. As the population ages, these figures will increase if we do not take action now,” said Professor Alexander Eggermont, ECCO President.

Professor Julio Celis, from the Danish Cancer Society, introduced the newly formed European Academy of Cancer Sciences, an independent body set up in order to provide knowledgeable and unbiased advice on matters of oncology policy and priorities. “Europe does not have a unified research strategy or vision to effectively fight the disease. We have created a European Research Council to stimulate fundamental research, but we do not have a strategy for filling the gap between basic disciplines and clinical research in the health area”, he said.

As a first step, a ‘Founding Group’ of 114 Academy members has been created. 30 of these members were chosen on the basis of their experience and reputation, and in turn they voted for the other members. Among the distinguished experts co-opted in the first place are Nobel prizewinners Professor Harald zur Hausen and Sir Paul Nurse; leading epidemiologist Sir Richard Peto; and the eminent Italian cancer surgeon Professor Umberto Veronesi. Members of the ECCO Board and Policy Committee also belong to the Founding Group. Elected membership is a life-long distinction, and the Academy will introduce new blood by electing up to 50 new members per year.

The Academy hopes to collaborate with the European Commission’s recently announced ‘European Partnership on Action against Cancer’ which plans to “invest in Europe’s future health by taking long-term and sustainable actions to tackle cancer.” “We are looking forward to working closely with the Commission in order to improve cancer detection, prevention, and healthcare approaches”, said Professor Celis.

Professor Gordon McVie, from the European Institute of Oncology, Milan, Italy, described the special ‘European twist’ of cancer. “We European scientists punch above our weight, compared to the rest of the world, but our cure rates for cancer are poorer. This is in part due to extraordinarily poor collaboration between scientists and doctors, and unacceptably inadequate communications among those cancer professionals and patients”, he said. The new Eurocancercoms consortium, set up under the 7th Research Framework Programme and bringing together all the major players in cancer at European level, will help to deal with this problem by conducting an inventory of all existing information tools currently in use, investigate their faults and flaws, and suggest requirements for the future.

“We need a one-stop shop, a Eurocancergoogle, perhaps, through whose portal anyone interested in getting accurate information about a cancer gene or a cancer trial will glide”, he said. “Only when we all start communicating with each other will we realise that Europe already has the tools within its grasp to defeat cancer.”

In another presentation, Professor Ulrik Ringborg, from the Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden, described the initial steps towards the creation of a European Platform for Translational Research. Translational studies build the bridge between basic research and human testing, and provide the data to support the opening of clinical trials, which move research results into practical applications as soon as possible. In 2008, the directors of 18 cancer centres came together to formulate the ‘Stockholm Declaration’, a manifesto that stated their intention to join forces in order to reach the critical mass and sustainability that is necessary to innovate and perform in all areas of cancer research. “The aim is to create a cutting-edge, virtual world-class infrastructure to improve diagnosis and care of cancer patients, a development that will require the sharing of patients, biological materials, infrastructures as well as competency”, he said.

The European Commission responded to the Declaration by announcing a call in the 7th Framework Programme with the title “Structuring translational cancer research between cancer research centres in Europe”. “Through a Network of Excellence linking comprehensive cancer centres and preclinical cancer research centres it will be possible to establish a collaboration between centres which will guarantee a complete translational cancer research process and a critical mass for technologies, patients and competences, and a platform for discovery-driven translational cancer research for innovation in prevention, early detection and individualised treatment”, said Professor Ringborg.

“We are optimistic that these initiatives will have a positive effect on all those associated with cancer, be they patients, doctors, scientists or carers”, said Professor Eggermont.

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* Dinner Workshop 1: “The unified approach: meeting the cancer challenges in the next decade”, European Health Forum Gastein, Thursday 1st October, 2009 – Congress Centre, Room 2 – 18.00-20.30.

NOTES

ECCO – The European Cancer Organisation

ECCO exists to uphold the right of all European cancer patients to the best possible treatment and care, and promote interaction between all organisations involved in cancer research, education, treatment and care at the European level.

Through its 24 Member Organisations – representing over 50,000 professionals – ECCO is the only multidisciplinary organisation that connects and responds to all stakeholders in oncology Europe-wide.

ECCO communicates and connects with the European cancer community through its website where visitors can browse the latest news, issues and comment, select from a wide variety of educational resources, and discover the many reasons for attending some of the leading congresses and conferences in oncology across Europe: www.ecco-org.eu

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