Commentary: Fifty Years of the European Organisation for Research and Treatment of Cancer (EORTC) – Making the Difference for the European Oncology Community

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Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: The Origins of the EORTC

The year 1962 marks a watershed for cancer care and cancer research in Europe. The previous November, a group of 20 individuals had met in Paris to discuss the establishment of a group that might work together and share expertise in the burgeoning field of cancer chemotherapy. A subsequent follow-up meeting in Milan in 1962 led to the formation of the Groupe Européen de Chimiothérapie Anticancéreuse (GECA). Its co-founders were Belgian clinician Henri Tagnon, French clinician George Mathé, Italian Director of the Mario Negri Institute Silvio Garattini, and Dutch scientist Dirk van Beckum (the first four Presidents of GECA/EORTC). Tagnon had returned from Memorial Sloan-Kettering in the U.S. and recognized the complementary value of treatment *and* research in the care of the cancer patient. These four like-minded individuals also realized that breaking down national boundaries and creating a trans-national collective of selected clinicians and researchers with a common goal would be of critical importance in advancing the discipline of clinical oncology in Europe. They proposed that the “continental” rather than the “national” approach would result in the “cross fertilisation of minds and elimination of parochial types of planning and working” and result in “training in clinical medicine and research [that] is more successful when carried out in a broader environment” [1]. Tagnon created a coordinating office in Brussels that recognized the critical importance of the multi-disciplinary approach and the added value of international cooperation for cancer research and treatment in Europe. In 1968, this cooperative initiative became the European Organisation for Re-

search and Treatment of Cancer (EORTC), which this year celebrates its 50th Anniversary.

The EORTC: A Community-Wide Approach to Cancer Research and Treatment

The achievements of this premier European network in the last 50 years have been significant and reflect the community philosophy and dedication to advancing clinical care for cancer patients engendered by its visionary creators. The management of febrile neutropenia/septicemia in the cancer patient, the development of combined surgery and chemotherapy in head and neck cancer, the refinement of adaptive clinical trials in leukemia and Hodgkins disease, and the use of stratified molecular therapeutic approaches in malignancies such as breast cancer and gastrointestinal stromal tumors (GIST) represent just a minute selection of EORTC achievements that have been recognized internationally as having

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changed medical practice. The EORTC also pioneered key quality assurance approaches in radiotherapy, while the unparalleled quality of the NCI-EORTC Symposium on New Drugs in Cancer Therapeutics was a key enabler of drug therapy advances and helped foster a continuing international part-

nership in this important area (see http://www.ecco-org.eu/Conferences/Conferences/EORTC_NCI_AACR-2012.aspx for the current version of this symposium). Many of these achievements and their clear benefits to cancer patients are expertly captured in a video entitled “The Energy of Hope,” which was launched at the EORTC 50th Anniversary Conference in Brussels in March 2012 and can be viewed at www.eortc.org/news/energy-hope.

The EORTC Today: Continuing the Pan-European Improvement in Cancer Care

Under the inspired stewardship of Maurice Staquet (1975–1990) and Françoise Meunier (1991–to date), the EORTC has continued to make significant strides to fulfill its pan-European mission to improve cancer care. The establishment of the different Cooperative Groups underpinned many of the achievements outlined above and continues to provide the focus for the comprehensive and wide-ranging activities of the EORTC. The EORTC network today comprises over 300 different hospitals/academic institutions in over 30 countries, where 2,500 researchers collaborate in all areas of cancer care and research to contribute to the mission of improving the management of cancer by increasing survival and improving quality of life (<http://www.eortc.org/>). The overarching framework that the EORTC has developed has been a key enabler of clinical and translational research and clinical trials in Europe, while EORTC's collective political voice has been a lead advocate for challenging the obstacles and helping to harmonize the legislative framework for clinical research in Europe (Directive 2001/20/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 4 April 2001, which took effect in 2004). The European Commission is presenting a legislative proposal in 2012 to revise the Clinical Trials Directive, which will have significant ramifications for all aspects of clinical research in Europe and will be addressed in a dialogue with readers in a future installment of *European Perspectives*.

Capturing the Cancer Patient Voice

The EORTC engagement with the cancer patient is impressive—over 180,000 patients have been registered in the EORTC databases over the last 50 years, while over 5,000 participants enter into EORTC clinical trials each year (<http://www.eortc.org/>). However, the dedication of the EORTC to the cancer patient is multifaceted, placing the patient resolutely at the center of the multidisciplinary pan-European process. This is reflected not only in the symbiotic interaction with European cancer societies and advocacy groups to capture the “Cancer Patient's Voice,” but also in the significant commitment to Quality of Life (QOL) issues, embodied by the annual QOL conference that takes place at the European Parliament (see <http://www.eortc.org/news/3rd-quality-life-conference> for details of the October 2012 conference).

In the interview that accompanies this commentary (http://sto-online.org/european_perspectives), Dr. Françoise Meunier, Director General of the EORTC, rightly acknowledges the contribution of those founding “visionnaires” and how the collective that they created is now a robust organization at the forefront of academic, clinical, and translational research, not only within the European sphere, but also worldwide. Given the guiding principles that the founders espoused back in 1962, they would be proud of the transnational and multidisciplinary network that has been cultivated over the 50-year history of the EORTC.

REFERENCE

1. Keating P, Cambrosio A. *Cancer on Trial: Oncology as a New Style of Practice*. University of Chicago Press, 2011:111.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This month's European Perspective includes two video interviews: one with Françoise Meunier, Director General of the EORTC conducted by Mark Lawler; another, forthcoming, with H.M. Pinedo, Co-Editor of the European Edition of *The Oncologist*, conducted by Patrick G. Johnston. The European Organisation for Research and Treatment of Cancer (EORTC) is a key enabler of translational and clinical research in Europe through its overarching support of the multidisciplinary transnational efforts of basic scientists and clinicians. As the EORTC celebrates its 50th Anniversary, these interviews highlight a number of its successes and identify the key challenges that it faces in its pioneering role in cancer research and cancer treatment in Europe. Please visit http://www.sto-online.org/european_perspectives to join the conversation.

UPCOMING IN EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES

As part of *The Oncologist's* continuing dialogue with the European cancer community, *European Perspectives* will focus on two events presented at the Euroscience Open Forum (ESOF): “The True Cost of Personalised Cancer Medicine” and “Can Europe Save the Pharma Industry?” ESOF is an interdisciplinary pan-European Science Conference that will take place in Dublin, Ireland from 11th–15th July 2012 (<http://esof2012.org>). Dublin has been designated European City of Science for 2012 so there will be a city-wide engagement with science to accompany the ESOF Conference. *European Perspectives* will provide commentary both in print articles and through online videos (roundtable discussion and a series of interviews) that will capture the key messages from these sessions at ESOF and promote a dialogue with our readers in these areas of contemporary relevance to the oncology community in Europe.