



Turning the World Cancer Declaration into action

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Cancer kills more people than does AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria combined. Going by recent global health trends, this year will see cancer emerge as the world's single leading cause of death. In an effort to focus the minds of international bodies and national governments on the gravity of the situation, the World Cancer Congress issued a World Cancer Declaration four years ago, which called for urgent action to deal with the worldwide crisis. It set 11 targets that need to be reached by 2020 in order to avoid a disastrous escalation in new cancers and to significantly improve cancer survival in all countries. These ambitious goals were based on growing evidence that concerted action can make a big difference, even over a short period of time.

The 2010 World Cancer Congress, gathering this August in Shenzhen, China, will offer the first opportunity to review progress towards meeting the 11 targets. The picture is likely to offer cause for both hope and disappointment. The Declaration has certainly elicited great interest: so far, more than 177,000 people have signed up, promising to help achieve its goals. Many influential associations, from LiveStrong to the World Economic Forum, have taken measures that contribute to achieving many of the targets. Universal access to effective pain control – target 8 – for instance, is now a step closer with the launch of the UICC

Global Access to Pain Relief Initiative (GAPRI). The intention is to engage with international bodies – including the relevant UN agencies – and to stimulate action on pain at a national level in key countries.

More disappointing is the impression that, over the last two years, efforts to use the Declaration as a template for developing regional or national targets have tailed off, without which it is very difficult to measure progress – or lack of it – on the ground. Whether the Declaration has stimulated a significant increase in the number of national cancer control plans, which still represent the most powerful method for realising the 11 targets, is also far from clear.

The World Cancer Congress in Shenzhen will look at ways to strengthen and further coordinate efforts towards achieving the World Cancer Declaration goals by the target date of 2020. Central to this will be rolling out UICC pilot projects on childhood cancers, cervical cancer and more, which have so far been limited to only a few countries.

With the United Nations General Assembly having belatedly recognised the urgent need for tackling non-communicable diseases like cancer, in a resolution passed a few weeks ago, we now have a window of opportunity to regalanise efforts where they are flagging, and prompt action where nothing has yet been done. The World Cancer Declaration will remain a vital roadmap to direct these efforts.

Franco Cavalli is the immediate past president of the UICC