

Inspiring the oncologists of tomorrow

→ Raphaël Brenner

Given that cancer is the number two killer in the world, oncology is surprisingly poorly taught at medical schools. So last September, the European School of Oncology piloted its first course aimed specifically at undergraduates.

IN the last two decades, numerous surveys have been conducted by Western academic bodies to assess the standard of cancer teaching in medical schools. The results have shown that oncology is insufficiently integrated in many university programmes, particularly in respect of cancer prevention. While recent publications have indicated a level of improvement in undergraduate cancer education in some medical schools, notably in the US, the general standard remains a concern for the oncology establishment.

In Europe, several academic and non-academic centres have tried to organise educational pilot projects or intra-institutional modules on oncology for medical students. In the Netherlands, the Faculty of Medical Sciences of Groningen State University launched a two-week international summer oncology training programme for medical students, with the aim of increasing students' knowledge about cancer care, improving the relationship between medical students and cancer patients and familiarising students with cancer-related issues in other countries. Other medical schools have developed edu-

cational programmes that make use of a variety of teaching methodologies: role-play, Internet-based educational tools, structured group communication (Delphi-technique), or preparation of abstracts and posters on oncological topics. These isolated initiatives, however, have done little to improve the general level of oncological training in Europe, and considerable variations in standards of oncology teaching remain across the continent. Many European universities still have no modules of oncology and medical oncology is recognised as a discipline in its own right in only a handful of European countries.

Nicholas Pavlidis, Professor of Medical Oncology at Ioannina University in Greece, believes there is now an urgent need to redress the poor levels of undergraduate cancer education, and argues that oncology should be a standard part of the curriculum in every medical school. This, he believes, is essential to ensure all newly qualified doctors are able to deal effectively with issues of cancer prevention, early diagnosis, curative management and palliative care. It could also play an important role in stimulating a new generation to specialise in oncology, he says.



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INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

In response to this gap in the curriculum, the European School of Oncology (ESO) has developed its own course aimed specifically at undergraduates, which it piloted in Ioannina last September. Jan Vermorken, Professor of Medical Oncology at the University of Antwerp, Belgium, who co-chairs the course alongside Pavlidis, says the initiative is responding to an urgent need: “Contrary to the US, there is a clear lack of training in medical oncology in Europe and the discipline is not sufficiently regarded as a vocation. The ESO course represents an important investment in the future.” Oncology education covers many areas. Beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills in cancer prevention, early diagnosis, treatment of curable tumours and management of terminally-ill patients, medical students also need to become familiar with the illness and those who suffer from it.

The ESO educational committee has constructed an intensive five-day, clinically oriented course covering the basics in epidemiology (clinical trials), prevention, natural history, diagnosis and therapeutic management of all six ‘big killers’ – breast, lung, colorectal, prostate, gastric and uterine cancers. Other common and/or curable tumours such as brain and lymphoma are also on the curriculum. “Although the course deals with all fields of oncology (surgery, radiotherapy, medical),” notes Vermorken, “we stress the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to cancer care, because this specific aspect of our discipline is often neglected or simply unrecognised.”

BOOK YOUR PLACE

The next ESO course will take place at the same venue on July 23–29, 2005. Students selected for the course are provided with meals and accommodation, but must pay their own travel expenses. The deadline for applications is 11 March 2005. Applications should be addressed to Nicholas Pavlidis at mideast@esoncology.org. Further information can be found on the ESO website at www.cancerworld.org

MOTIVATED STUDENTS

The first course took place in September 2004, at the University of Ioannina, Greece. It was publicised in medical schools and on the ESO website, and was limited to sixth-year medical students studying in Europe. Thirty-five students were selected from 72 applicants. The selection process was based on a recommendation by an academic mentor, the applicant’s CV, fluency in English and level of motivation. “In other words,” says Pavlidis, “we only had highly motivated students, and it is our hope that they will make a substantive contribution to oncology in the future.”

The faculty at Ioannina consisted of leading European academics and medical oncologists, and the educational programme included case presentations and plenty of discussion. “The size of the group, the informal atmosphere, the students’ level of motivation, together with the beauty of the setting, allowed for a privileged relationship between the students and faculty,” says Vermorken, “and hopefully many vocations were born or reinforced at Ioannina.” Evaluations of the programme were made on a daily basis through multiple-choice questionnaires.

The students were provided at the beginning of the course with a 500-page book containing short chapters by each faculty member, references, case presentations and copies of slides presented at the course. The final evaluation, which took place at the end of the course, showed a high degree of satisfaction on the part of students and faculty, encouraging the organisers to run it again.