

Poorer countries take their place at the World Cancer Conference

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Last November 800 people working to control cancer in 82 countries across the world gathered in Dublin to share their experiences of what works and what doesn't. This was the fourth World Conference of Cancer Organisations, but for a number of developing nations it was a first.

The World Conference for Cancer Organisations (WCCO) is an initiative of the International Union Against Cancer (UICC), the only international non-governmental organisation dedicated exclusively to the global control of cancer. The Conference seeks to bring together all organisations involved in the global fight against cancer, from small societies with limited funds and reliant on volunteers, to high-profile charity organisations, which raise and dispense large sums of money and employ skilled medical, scientific, educational and administrative personnel.

The 4th WCCO was hosted by the Irish Cancer Society at the end of last year. It was remarkable particularly for the significant attendance from mid- and low-income countries, including Jordan, Libya, Tunisia, Malaysia, India, Ghana, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Jamaica and Cuba. Also new was a welcome focus on patient advocacy initiatives, such as patient forums, which have provided effective platforms for patients, caregivers and the growing number of cancer survivors worldwide to voice their special needs and concerns to representatives from the medical community and government.

John Seffrin, UICC President and CEO of the American Cancer Society, opened the conference with a rallying cry, calling on delegates to help put cancer on the global political agenda as a higher priority than ever before. "Seven million people will die of cancer this year alone. The untold story is that most of those deaths will be needless. We need to share best practices and knowledge ... to work together to develop effective national cancer strategies that make the transition from what is to what could be," he said.

Isabel Mortara, Executive Director of the UICC, highlighted the potential for improvements among the lower-income countries, which bear the lion's share of the world's cancer burden yet suffer a chronic lack of resources in critical areas like screening, public health education and access to treatment and palliative care. "With more effective sharing of knowledge and a more coordinated approach to cancer control," she argued, "developing countries could make great strides forward, even within the context of severe resource constraints."

The proven success of patient advocacy in a number of countries was also seen as a model for progress: "Patient forums and other similar



Ranjit Kaur (right), President of Malaysia's Reach to Recovery Breast Cancer Support Network, with the UICC's Isabel Mortara. Kaur is holding the 2004 Outstanding UICC Volunteer Award for her pioneering work in patient advocacy

groups are already helping change the way health services are delivered in developed countries like the US, UK, Australia and Canada. Our challenge now is to capitalise on this momentum in mid- and low-income nations, where patients often face very tough social, economic and cultural issues," said Mortara.

Ireland proved a timely choice of venue for the event, as it is the first country in the world to implement a total workplace ban on smoking. The ban, which came into effect on 29 March 2004, covers not only shops, factories and offices, but also restaurants, pubs, clubs and bars. In his welcome address to delegates, Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern applauded his country's "landmark effort to protect employees, children and others from the toxic effects of tobacco," and urged delegates to take some time out from the very full programme of plenary sessions, symposia and workshops to sample the delights of smoke-free Irish pubs.

The conference programme was tailored to meet the needs of a broad cross-section of the cancer community, including researchers, educators, scientists, health professionals, advocates, programme coordinators, and information and communications officers from public health organisations, patient groups, and governmental agencies. Among the very many topics covered in depth in a packed three-day agenda were: efforts to cut tobacco use, patient advocacy initiatives, national cancer control planning, early detection

and prevention strategies, psychosocial factors in cancer care, survivorship issues, and effective marketing and fundraising strategies. Special Spanish- and French-speaking workshops were also held.

The conference saluted extraordinary contributions to the global effort to control cancer at a Gala Dinner held at Trinity College. Four people active in different fields across the globe were presented with UICC awards for their exceptional work. Ranjit Kaur, President of Malaysia's Reach to Recovery breast cancer support network, was recognised for her pioneering work in patient advocacy. Leslie Sobin, chief of gastrointestinal pathology at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in Washington, DC, was awarded for his work on the TNM classification of tumours. Awards were also presented to the Finnish Cancer Society, for the effectiveness of its comprehensive tobacco control policies and cervical cancer screening programme, and Micheál Martin, former Irish Minister of Health and Children, for his efforts to implement Europe's first total workplace smoking ban.

Addressing the closing session of the event, Irish Cancer Society Chief Executive John McCormack urged the global cancer community to work together more closely and to use events like WCCO to forge and strengthen international partnerships and networks that will help speed advances in prevention, early diagnosis, treatment and patient care.