



Commissioner Janez POTOČNIK

*Research on Cancer: A European
Perspective*

*EORTC NCI-ASCO Conference on
Molecular Markers in Cancer*

Brussels

*Thursday, 15 November 2007
14h00 – 14h30*

Dear Professor Meunier, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Please accept my thanks for your invitation to open this meeting. There are three reasons why I am particularly pleased to be here.

The first reason is that the diseases related to cancer matter to all of us.

It is the second most common cause of death in the European Union. 1 in 3 men and 1 in 4 women will be directly affected by cancer by the age of 75. 2 million more of our people are diagnosed with a form of this disease every year. And about 3000 of us die of cancer every single day.

So I would like to express my support for the fight against this burden.

The second reason for my presence is that it provides me with an opportunity to acknowledge the role in this struggle of the European Organisation for Research and Treatment of Cancer. Your work over the last 45 years deserves praise, for the promotion and conduct of multidisciplinary research in Europe, and for the resulting improvements in cancer treatments.

Particularly welcome is the long-running and successful partnership with the co-organisers of this event, the US National Cancer Institute and the American Society of Clinical Oncology. Cancer is a global problem, so efficient collaboration will hasten effective solutions.

International cooperation is an increasingly prominent theme in European-level research efforts, and this is a very pleasing example of transatlantic co-operation.

I would also like to acknowledge other partners that we have with us today, including individual researchers and their institutes and national regulators.

The theme of this conference, "Molecular Markers in Cancer", is without doubt a "hot topic" in cancer research today. Indeed, it corresponds to one of the more promising research avenues, offering significant advances in the diagnosis and treatment of cancer.

However, it is not just the topic that distinguishes this event from any number of conferences about cancer in Europe. For me, the timing and political context of this meeting are important.

So my third reason for being here is to provide a perspective on the recent and upcoming developments in European cancer research policy.

What I want to share with you is **not** my views on "cancer research in Europe"! What I want to talk about is "**European** research on cancer", which is not the same thing.

By "**European** research on cancer", I mean two distinct things:

- Firstly, I mean cancer research that is funded by the European Community;
- And secondly, I am referring to the creation of a coherent approach to cancer research across Europe; in other words, the coordination of EU and national efforts in this field.

The former is a significant reality. The latter is very much a work in progress. And both are closely linked to the development of a European Research Area.

The European Research Area was created with four main aims:

- To enable researchers to move and interact seamlessly, benefit from world-class infrastructures and work with excellent networks of research institutions;
- To reinforce the links between education, research and innovation, so that knowledge can be taught, shared and used more effectively for social, business and policy purposes;
- To open up and coordinate European, national and regional research programmes to support the best research throughout Europe;
- And to develop strong links with partners around the world for mutual benefit and to address global challenges.

Our work to achieve these goals is having its effect in the domain of cancer research, using the 7th Framework Programme for Research at community level and through coordination with the EU Member States.

Cancer research has been a clear priority within the Framework Programmes since 1988. Funding over that time has steadily increased from €18 million to the level of €450 million between 2002 and 2006 in the 6th Framework Programme.

A similar amount which will be topped up with other new initiatives is available within the Health priority of the 7th Framework Programme and €70 million in funding has already been allocated since the first call for proposals.

We place a firm emphasis on "translational research", to turn basic knowledge into clinical applications. Collaborative research projects and networks are being supported to take a holistic approach, linking research, prevention, diagnosis and treatment.

We will exploit the European dimension by combining resources and complementary competences from several European countries, and by encouraging the comparison of results and data from the whole of Europe.

And throughout the framework programme, we are placing increased emphasis on international collaboration. I am keen to see this reflected in projects with our US and other partners.

But this is very far from the whole story in FP7.

The new European Research Council has begun its work to support basic research projects, undertaken by individual teams. €300 million have been made available for 2007 alone but by 2013 that figure will have increased to €1.7 billion. Opportunities exist here for world class research relevant to cancer.

Cancer will be one of the key areas under the Innovative Medicines Initiative, to be operational in 2008. This public-private partnership

between the European Commission and the pharmaceutical industry will accelerate the development of new treatments.

There is also much to say in the area of research infrastructure at European level. 3 proposals in the field of medical research, made by the European Strategic Forum on Research Infrastructures, have been approved for funding. All of them are relevant to cancer research:

- €36 million is earmarked for the construction of a European Clinical Research Infrastructures Network and for biotherapy facilities. This distributed infrastructure will provide a harmonised framework for the conduct of European clinical trials;
- €100 million is the estimated cost of the European bio-banking and bio-molecular resources infrastructure. The quality assessed sample collections, genomics resources and bioinformatics tools to be made available will be critical tools for European clinical research and prevention strategies;
- The European Advanced Translational Research Infrastructure will establish a network of new research centres to transform basic discoveries into clinical interventions for major diseases. Cutting edge technologies will be employed against major diseases. Cancer will be one of the targets and the investment to build these facilities is expected to total €255 million.

But as I said earlier, European Community funding through FP7 is only one of the elements needed to develop the European Research Area.

Some 95% of all research spending in Europe happens at national level, not European level.

Therefore, the achievement of a coherent European effort in cancer research must involve greater coordination of the EU Member States. For me, this is a clear priority.

One example is a close association of national research programmes - called an "ERANET" – that once confirmed will work on the use of cancer registries for research purposes.

Another vital activity in the coordination of national cancer research efforts is the EUROCAN initiative. This scheme gathers most of the major cancer research institutions as well as several national funding agencies.

It is aimed at mapping national cancer initiatives, identifying needs in Member States and areas for collaboration, establishing research priorities for future investment and defining the practical implementation.

The results of this study will be presented early next year and I will be glad to see ambitious proposals.

Next year will also see the unveiling of new proposals to reinforce the development of the European Research Area. Building on the ideas that have emerged from the public consultation I initiated earlier this year, I will propose concrete measures to accelerate our progress as a knowledge-based society.

Many of the benefits will bolster your own efforts in cancer research.

I applaud the decision of the future Slovenian Presidency of the European Union to make of cancer and cancer research priorities of its agenda during the first half of 2008.

In this spirit, the Slovenian government, jointly with the European Commission, will organise next spring an international conference to address questions such as:

- How to improve the structure and coordination of cancer research in EU?
- How to increase cancer research funding?
- How to improve the translation of knowledge into useful applications?
- And how better to incorporate patients into the process of planning cancer research?

The conference should result in new concrete initiatives to enhance the fight against cancer at the European scale. I hope that many – if not all of you – will be there.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Over the last 20 years, we have made real progress in the fight against cancer at European level.

New research, better methods, more tools and increased coordination; these are all making a difference in the translation of knowledge into effective treatments.

2008 promises further steps forward in our efforts to defeat the **blight** of cancer.

I commend your efforts and wish you all a very successful meeting.