



European Society for Medical Oncology (ESMO) Position Paper

The role of medical oncologists in the fight against cancer in Europe

The Burden of Cancer in Europe

With more than 3 million new cases and 1.7 million deaths each year, cancer currently represents the second most important cause of death and morbidity in Europe¹. One out of every two men and one out of every two women will experience cancer during their lifetimes. While survival rates from cancer have improved greatly over the past twenty years thanks to major scientific progress, significant variations in survival rates between Member States persist. This can be explained by varying levels of public awareness of cancer symptoms, as well as by differences in the accessibility, efficiency, skills and resources of diagnostic and treatment services.

The Role of Medical Oncologists in Cancer Care

Cancer is a highly complex disease. In fact, the term cancer is commonly used to cover a wide range of diseases, which all share one common feature, the indefinite growth of cells without reference to the need of the body (neoplasm). Rather than being confined to one organ, cancer is a biological process which – depending on the tumour-type – can affect the whole body. Due to the systemic nature of disease, cancer requires systemic treatment.

Thanks to high-quality medical innovations such as chemotherapy, targeted treatment and to some extent immunotherapy, a whole range of drugs is available to treat each patient's condition. These drugs can be effective, if administered properly, but are also highly toxic and costly. As specialists in cancer medical therapy, medical oncologists prescribe the most appropriate cancer drug for each patient's condition and accompany the patient throughout the illness, from diagnosis and treatment to end of life management. The vast majority of cancer patients will be referred to a medical oncologist at the earliest stage of their treatment.

Along with surgery and radiation therapy, medical therapy constitutes one of the three available treatments in cancer care. The best results for patients are achieved when medical oncologists act as the "patient interface" within a multidisciplinary team consisting of radiologists, surgeons, organ-based specialists, nurses, nutritionists, counsellors, and others.

¹ Freddy Bray in *Responding to the challenge of cancer in Europe*, European Observatory of Health systems, 2008



The Importance of EU Recognition

Unlike other members of a multidisciplinary cancer team, medical oncology is not currently recognised as a professional qualification at EU level (Directive 2005/36/EC). As a result of this non-recognition, medical oncologists are hindered in their professional mobility. Since there is a shortage of medical oncologists in many countries, this obstacle prevents cancer patients from having optimal access to specialized care.

Education, clear criteria and guidelines are needed to ensure optimal qualification of physicians using drugs for cancer treatment. Medical oncology training is comprised of the scientific basis of oncology, prevention, screening, diagnosis, the use and evaluation of specific medical anticancer treatments, and clinical investigation of malignant diseases. Medical oncologists are trained in the application of such interventions to bring optimal benefits, taking into account the psychological and social needs of cancer patients and their families.

The standard requirements for training in medical oncology according to the Global Curriculum, established by the ESMO and its American Counterpart ASCO², are a total training period from five to six years, beginning with training in internal medicine for at least two years, followed by a training program in medical oncology for three to four years. This syllabus specifies that the three to four year training program in medical oncology must include a minimum of two years of full-time clinical training in the diagnosis and management of a broad spectrum of neoplastic diseases.

It is a matter of grave concern to such highly qualified cancer specialists that their professional qualification is not recognised throughout the EU. This has multiple consequences:

- 1) lack of well-qualified cancer specialists in some countries
- 2) inappropriate use of anti-cancer agents by sub optimally trained physicians
 - anti-cancer agents often have very steep dose response curves meaning that highly trained professionals are required to manage the considerable range of side effects and avoid drug-induced deaths
- 3) reduced chances of cure or stabilisation for the patient
- 4) increase in cost by inappropriate use of highly costly targeted therapies
- 5) many promising young doctors or scientists from across Europe will be discouraged from a postgraduate qualification in medical oncology.

Europe has faced and will continue to face a major threat from cancer. Medical oncologists must be free from unnecessary administrative restraints and thereby allowed to focus on the safe and effective treatment of their patients in order to win the fight against this terrible disease.

² ESMO/ASCO: Recommendations for a Global core curriculum in medical oncology, <http://www.esmo.org/education/recommendations-for-a-global-core-curriculum-in-mo.html>.



About the European Society for Medical Oncology (ESMO)

*The European Society for Medical Oncology (ESMO) is the leading European non-profit, professional organisation for medical oncology promoting multidisciplinary cancer treatment around the world. ESMO unites medical oncologists, oncology specialists, healthcare professionals, caregivers, patients and policy makers in a global alliance committed to eradicating cancer and ensuring equal access to high quality treatment for all patients. Thanks to its state-of-the-art education and training programs, ESMO plays an instrumental role in providing the oncology community with the most up-to-date scientific research and information available. ESMO is dedicated to educating and supporting oncologists, optimising patient care, disseminating cancer-specific information to the public, and advocating patient rights. As an authoritative voice in the fight against cancer, ESMO provides both the platform and the consultative expertise to influence national and international organisations as well as European authorities, in order to establish common standards for a multidisciplinary approach to cancer treatment. Through its flagship journal, *Annals of Oncology*, ESMO publishes articles on all aspects of clinical oncology.*

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