Creating a stronger front against cancer: ESMO and ECCO join forces

These are exciting times for European oncology. While cancer continues to be a leading cause of death and suffering [1], recent advances in multiple areas of research are bringing reasonable hope that we may be able to turn the tide and make real progress in the fight against cancer in the near future. Such hope comes attached with a responsibility for the cancer community and its key stakeholders, including national governments, the European Commission, universities, cancer researchers, physicians and other health specialists, patients, the general public, and equally important, our professional cancer societies.

In this regard, at European Society for Medical Oncology (ESMO) we are involved in a dynamic process of redefining our key strategies and goals and increasing our focus on providing cancer education, fostering research and training, and supporting the growing needs of our members in a complex oncology environment. An important objective of ESMO is also to build crucial alliances that will result in a united voice for cancer in Europe [2]. In this context, the ESMO Board of Directors recently approved joining the newly created European CanCer Organization (ECCO) as a founding member together with other key European cancer societies.

The principle behind this decision is simple: together we are stronger. The concept in cancer therapy of the sum of the parts together being greater than each part on its own is called ‘synergy’. And creating synergies is what this new ESMO–ECCO partnership is all about.

The decision to join with other cancer societies under this newly formed European umbrella organization is in line with ESMO’s tradition, dating back >30 years, to provide service to the oncology community and to promote multidisciplinary cancer treatment and care around the world. The idea of multidisciplinarity has been present since the birth of our society in 1975 when our founding members decided to create a society for medical oncology, a new specialty for physicians dedicated to the care and treatment of cancer patients. Since that time, as medical oncology has flourished around the world, so in turn has ESMO. In subsequent decades, ESMO experienced a steady growth in membership as well as programs, we embarked on publishing *Annals*, launched the ESMO Congress, established clinical guidelines [3], created fellowship programs and much more in order to disseminate research results and keep medical oncologists continually up to date on new treatment advances. The turn of the century brought an increased awareness of the relationship between physicians and patients, to which ESMO responded by being the first major oncology society worldwide to organize within its congress a seminar for cancer patients and their families, successfully transforming the patient–physician relationship into one of increased partnership. In more recent years, with the onset of translational research and the integration of targeted therapies, ESMO broadened its mission to support multidisciplinary treatment worldwide of cancer patients by specialized teams of oncology professionals [4].

The need to enhance partnership between different professional societies has also become increasingly apparent and has already resulted in a number of collaborative initiatives between ESMO and other societies [2, 5]. In recent years, ESMO has partnered with its sister society, European Society for Therapeutic Radiology and Oncology, as well as other oncology societies, to create a series of successful meetings on selected tumors. ESMO is now engaged in meetings in several tumor types, including lung, urological, head and neck, gastrointestinal, and breast cancer. These initiatives have proven highly successful and we will continue to expand them in order to tailor our services to meet the needs of our members.

By joining ECCO, we now bring this commitment to partnership to a new level. We are going to make European cancer research stronger, and by working together across multiple disciplines and with all oncology stakeholders, we will build a united front with a single one-voice approach. This will make it easier for European politicians and decision makers to take notice, to understand the complexity and the needs of the oncology community, and to act on our unified messages. Through this joint effort, ESMO and ECCO are sending a strong signal that we will stand united to make sure that every cancer patient in Europe has access to, and receives, the highest standard of multidisciplinary treatment and care.

In addition to ESMO’s joining ECCO as one of the federation’s six founding members, the ESMO and ECCO Board of Directors have also agreed to host a cobranded ECCO–ESMO Multidisciplinary Congress, whose Scientific Committee will be chaired both by ECCO and ESMO. The first joint congress will be held from 20–24 September 2009 in Berlin, with subsequent joint congresses being held biennially in the ‘uneven-numbered’ years. This decision is in line with our strategy to improve services to our members by holding an annual ESMO Congress, which in the ‘even-numbered’ years will be a stand-alone ESMO Congress and in the uneven-numbered years will be a joint multidisciplinary congress with ECCO. In this way, both ESMO and ECCO–ESMO congresses will perfectly complement each other.

The biennial ECCO–ESMO Congress is a very important cornerstone in this united effort and I envision this meeting, as
well as the ESMO Congress, to be a great international forum with a tremendous amount of science and state-of-the-art education and training, a platform for discussions on topics of interest to all European oncologists, and an exciting knowledge exchange with participants from all over the world. Like the ESMO Congress, this is the type of meeting we need in Europe to retain young European talent and showcase research done, or led, by the European oncology community. Together with ECCO, we will work very hard to make sure that the first joint congress in 2009 will provide the best and most updated scientific data and networking opportunities for everyone working in cancer.

ESMO appreciates the fresh approach ECCO has taken toward their ‘federation’ role, acting as an ‘inverted umbrella’ organization that supports its members from underneath. With this core philosophy, ECCO has shown that it understands the necessity of its member societies to hold their own meetings and to foster member-based activities to fulfill the needs of their respective specialties. Therefore, ESMO will continue to engage in all of its current activities and to pursue its model of direct collaboration individually with other oncology societies.

In our daily practice, we are constantly reminded that each person touched by cancer expects from us that we do everything we can to achieve our goals in as little time as possible. While working together across different oncology disciplines is not always an easy task, this new partnership between ECCO and ESMO is a big step in a positive direction. We realize that there is still a lot of work ahead of us, but by continuously reminding ourselves of our commitment of putting patients first, we will never lose our enthusiasm and relentlessly keep our focus.

On behalf of ESMO
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