

## The NCI All Ireland Cancer Conference

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The National Cancer Institute (NCI) has recently decided to embark on an international partnership with the developing cancer programs on the Island of Ireland (Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland) in an attempt to further improve the quality and range of cancer services available for patients. This Transatlantic Partnership called the All Ireland-NCI Cancer Consortium offers exciting opportunities in cancer treatment, education and research as the cancer-caring communities from both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland prepare to join with the U.S. NCI in this major endeavor. The inaugural event of the partnership will be the NCI All Ireland Cancer Conference to be held in Belfast, October 3-6, 1999. (See [www.allirelandcancer.com](http://www.allirelandcancer.com), for information on the conference.)

Cancer is a significant cause of mortality and morbidity on the Island of Ireland. There are approximately 28,000 new cases and approximately 11,000 deaths from cancer each year. Therefore, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have among the highest cancer incidence and mortality rates in the Western World. In recent years there has been a major restructuring of cancer services in both parts of the Island. This is the result of several government reports such as the Campbell Report in Northern Ireland and the National Strategy Document for Cancer in the Republic of Ireland. The National Strategy Document proposes that cancer treatment services should be centered around primary care services, regional services, supra-regional centers and a national coordinating structure whereby the supra-regional centers deliver specialist surgery, medical and radiation oncology, rehabilitation and specialist palliative care.

Three supra-regional cancer centers are being established in the cities of Dublin, Cork and Galway and a National Cancer Forum, which has served as a multidisciplinary advisory board to the Government, has pushed

the development and implementation of this plan. This has already resulted in a major expansion in the number of medical oncologists practicing in Ireland but further development is required to facilitate multidisciplinary care, to establish programs of education and training and to harness the scientific talent available to engage in the international effort against cancer. In Northern Ireland the Chief Medical Officer commissioned a report entitled "Cancer Services—Investing for the Future" whose key recommendations were that Northern Ireland should have one cancer center in Belfast and four smaller cancer units. This report also recommended the implementation of a multidisciplinary approach to cancer diagnosis, treatment and palliative care. As in the Republic, all the recommendations of the Report have been accepted and the planning and implementation of this plan are now well under way. Therefore, development of services for cancer patients is a top priority for both governments on the Island and, given the process of cancer service development, it is timely to bring international expertise such as the NCI on board as partners in this effort.

The decision by the NCI to develop an agreement for cancer research and service development in Ireland is a major boost for those involved in cancer care and research and will, no doubt, help speed the process of redevelopment. There have already been several visits from senior NCI personnel to Ireland including *Dr. Klausner*, the Director of the NCI, to determine the potential impact of this agreement and to identify the most productive areas of interaction between the NCI and the Irish Cancer Community. As a result of these visits, the NCI has decided to focus on several areas of strategic importance whose objectives will be to enhance clinical services, improve patient care, promote North South collaboration and cement strategic Ireland-U.S. collaboration in cancer research and development. The agreement will build

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on existing informal links in U.S.-Irish scientific, medical education and training and also promote clinical trials and cancer epidemiology programs.

Major components of the NCI Ireland Agreement will include some of the following:

#### **Education and Exchange of Scholars**

Education will form one of the major platforms of this agreement through the support of educational programs for medical, nursing and scientific staff. These will include the exchange of scholars, including Ph.D., M.D. and nursing students. Particular emphasis will be given to the exchange of medical and nursing trainees focused on clinical research. This will have an immediate clinical impact and will naturally extend the support that has already been given to the training of medical and scientific trainees from the Island of Ireland. Further exchanges would include Ph.D. students, laboratory-based M.D.s in training, clinical visiting professors and investigators from the U.S. wishing to extend their studies in Ireland.

#### **Clinical Trials**

Another major area for partnership will be the enhancement of a clinical trials infrastructure and clinical trial development. Modernization of cancer care requires that delivery of care should be in the context of evidence-based medicine. This requires a vigorous and contemporary clinical trials infrastructure which would center around the clinical trials infrastructure already established at the Northern Ireland Cancer Centre and the Irish Clinical Oncology Research Group (ICORG) in the Republic of Ireland. The NCI has already commissioned the development of a new Clinical Trials Information System (CTIS) which seeks as its goal to set international standards in the clinical trials process, and it has already committed significant resources to its implementation. The outcome of this element of partnership will be that clinical trials performed in Irish institutions will immediately be compatible for collation, analysis and presentation with studies performed in the U.S. Moreover, this system will allow participating centers to immediately conform to international standards. This proposal therefore permits participating institutions in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to quickly achieve data management standards of the highest quality.

#### **Teleconferencing**

Teleconferencing capabilities are already established in both the NCI and in Ireland and indeed limited teleconferencing linkages have already been established between the partners. Further investment in this infrastructure will be vital to the success of major elements of this partnership. It will facilitate clinical trial development, education programs, patient

services development and exchange of clinical and scientific ideas. Communication between sites will be essential to the success of this partnership.

#### **Tumor Registries**

Another area for major collaboration and partnership will be in the use of the Cancer Tumor Registries in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The monitoring of improvements in cancer care can only be undertaken with a reliable tumor registry that tracks population-based cancer incidence and mortality. These data are now available in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and both Governments recognize their importance. The NCI proposes to assist both Tumor Registries by developing a common database that can assist in consultation, informatic tools and quality control. Consolidation of the Registries, North and South, will improve the overall quality of data collection and provide information on a genetically stable population. This therefore will act as a major tool for epidemiological investigations and programs focused on screening and prevention.

#### **Developments in Cancer Clinical Services**

The NCI Ireland partnership also proposes to assist the further development of clinical service programs on the Island of Ireland. These will include the improvement and standardization of Radiation Oncology practice and the development of a consolidated Radiation Oncology program for research. There are a limited number of radiation facilities on the Island of Ireland and there are significant needs in terms of linking practice elements and the implementation of uniform standards of practice. Assistance in standardizing and driving the development of clinical services will also extend to elements of medical and surgical oncology practice as well as palliative care. The development of palliative care services is already at an advanced stage on the Island of Ireland and is one that the NCI will carefully evaluate in terms of its own developing programs.

#### **The NCI All Ireland Cancer Conference**

An important event to highlight the commencement of this special relationship will be the NCI All Ireland Cancer Conference to be held in Belfast October 3-6, 1999. This Conference will address clinical, laboratory, epidemiological and political issues that are pertinent to the care of cancer patients. It will highlight important work by Irish, American and European scientists with further input from well-known international academic and biotechnology investigators from across the world. These international experts will not only be asked to speak on their areas of expertise but also to comment on clinical and scientific

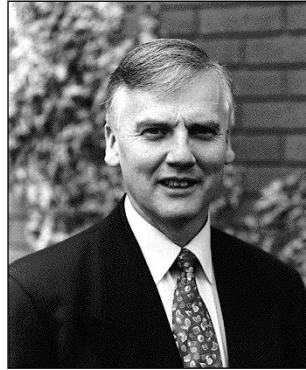
programs that may help improve North and South interaction and Transatlantic collaboration.

Finally, it is hoped that the Conference will be a marker of a very special interaction on the Island of Ireland focused on the overall development of cancer services for patients. It will also signal the start of an important partnership between

the NCI and those involved in cancer care and research in Ireland. This tripartite cooperative agreement is a most exciting venture and it will hopefully be an example of how an effort focused on a human problem common to all societies can generate a spirit of cooperation and help to eliminate strife.



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**PUBLISHER'S NOTE:**

*The Oncologist* will publish the Proceedings of the NCI All Ireland Cancer Conference.