AICR (the Association for International Cancer Research) will already be known to a number of EACR members who have either held or been funded by AICR grants or acted as referees for it. This cancer research charity, based in St. Andrews, Scotland, has an important relationship with EACR, as the co-sponsor of the EACR Travel Fellowships which each year make it possible for students and early career researchers to attend workshops and courses or make collaborative visits around the world.

Founded in the late 1970’s, AICR has grown rapidly to its current level. All this is thanks to the generosity of their donors, as AICR receives no funding from the government or statutory bodies. AICR supporters have enabled AICR to fund over €177 million of cancer research to date, mostly in Europe.

The unique aspect of AICR is that it has no geographical boundaries. It accepts grant applications from, and is willing to fund research in any country, on any cancer type.

The key role played by AICR in funding cutting edge basic and translational research into cancer, right across the globe, has never been more apparent than during the current euro zone debt crisis.

Four leading scientists, from Greece, Portugal and Italy, have confirmed that without their AICR funding, their research may well have ended prematurely or, as in the case of award-winning Dr. Miguel Godinho Ferreira, from Lisbon, may never have begun in the first place.

Speaking from the University of Crete, where he is Assistant Professor in Cell Biology, Dr. George Zachos - who worked in research in the UK for 10 years before returning to Greece almost four years ago - said the situation in his homeland, which was difficult before the current economic crisis, is now much worse.

“It is very hard to apply for Greek funding, especially in cancer research,” he explained. “There are not any Greek charities you can apply to and the Greek Government doesn’t have regular opportunities for funding, making planning very difficult. For example, until very recently, there was a period of five or six years without any Government funding opportunities in most scientific disciplines.

“In other words, I would most definitely not have been able to work without AICR funding.”

Two post doctorate scientists and one PhD student in Professor Zachos’ laboratory are all paid for by AICR. He believes his grant from the charity has shielded him from the worst effects of the euro crisis.

Christos Tsatsanis, Associate Professor of Clinical Chemistry in the University of Crete’s School of Medicine, has similar views.

“Being able to seek financial support from reliable sources such as AICR has been vital for us. Without the help from AICR and the EU it would be almost impossible to continue our research. The whole situation over the last few years has been frustrating and frequently discouraging,” he explained.

Italian scientist Dr. Marina Mione of The IFOM-IEO Campus, in Milan, says she could not have hoped to have survived the euro zone crisis without the: “fundamentally important” support of AICR.

“Cancer does not stop for political reasons and we must ensure that cancer research doesn’t either.”

“I believe that many university research groups and small private research institutes (as well as the biomedical companies) will be hit badly by the crisis and the restrictive measures that the Italian government has taken to respond to it.

Dr. Miguel Godinho Ferreira, group leader at the Instituto Gulbenkian de Ciência, just outside Lisbon, is the first scientist to win Portugal’s €10,000 Simbiontes Award, for his proposal to investigate the cellular changes that cause cancer in adults. He said his €153,000 grant from AICR, which ran from April 2006 until August 2011, had been “crucial” for him in establishing his lab in Portugal.

“In a very direct way, AICR allowed me to come back to my country to produce high quality science as an independent researcher,” he said.

“Funding in Portugal, apparently in contrast to Greece, has been steady with calls open every year. However, the amount they can fund has steeply declined from 23% of the applications three years ago down to only 11% last year.

“In times of financial difficulties (in Portugal especially) it is reassuring to have AICR as a world charity to promote cancer research wherever it is done best. Dr. Lara Bennett, Scientific Advisor for AICR, said “The current euro zone crisis only serves to underline the importance of AICR’s aim to fund the best research we can, wherever in the world it take place. Cancer does not stop for political reasons and we must ensure that cancer research doesn’t either. We know that these unsettled economic times are hard on everyone which is why we are so grateful to our donors who continue to give what they can.