ASPIC: the birth of a National Cancer Research Association

The Portuguese Association of Cancer Research (ASPIC) was officially formed in February 2013. It soon affiliated to EACR, becoming EACR’s 14th affiliated national society. With over 100 members, the society is now planning its first biennial Congress.

Professor Leonor David, President of ASPIC, reflects on how the society came into being.

A long-time ambition

The idea to create a Portuguese Association of Cancer Research (ASPIC) was a long-time ambition for Portuguese cancer researchers. But because cancer researchers were dispersed between different types of institutions, all pretty small and not always collaborating with fluidity, it was almost a dream. Then when I was representing Portugal on the EACR Council, the idea came back again. We were now at a better position than ever in our scientific life in Portugal, with a steadily growing community and with research centres attaining critical mass. The financial situation was becoming a threat to the world and to Portugal in particular and maybe this was already making a difference in the way we think - that collectively we may fare better than alone.

The next steps

I discussed the possibility of launching the Portuguese Association for Cancer Research with colleagues from different places and backgrounds in Portugal. We organised a steering committee and started to interact with EACR to move ahead. Julio Celis, then EACR President, and Robert Kenney, EACR Executive Director, came to the XXI Porto Cancer Meeting at IPATIMUP and Julio gave a talk precisely on “Structuring the cancer research community in Portugal under the auspices of EACR”. This was seminal to the next steps and to the organisation, in October 2012, of a “One Day Symposium Sponsored by EACR” in Porto, with Carlos Caldas (UK) as keynote speaker. For the first time we had a showcase of Portuguese cancer research in a single event, with researchers from different backgrounds meeting each other and seeing each other’s work. I think it was a hallmark day, perfectly organised with the help of the EACR Secretariat. And it gave us the confidence that the momentum was there to go ahead.

Gaining support

It has not been easy. People tend to be in their own world, and we are overwhelmed with our problems: projects to write, publication pressure to unprecedented (and detrimental?) levels, and growing bureaucracy – the most threatening of all! But we are thriving. Our sponsors, with few exceptions, include all major institutions involved in cancer research, who understood that belonging to a national network was positive for their own setting at the national and international level. That gave us a strong boost. Companies, pharmaceutical, biotech and others were more difficult to attract, to our surprise. Only two companies joined the crew in the first year. Associated members were slowly recruited, on a day by day contact that is steadily growing.

The future

We have reason to believe that ASPIC is already an actor on the national stage. We are still delineating our strategies for the future but certainly biennial congresses are critical for gathering scientists in such difficult times. The first will take place 25-26 November 2014 at Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian in Lisbon. We are already on the move to make that a critical moment in the life of ASPIC. Another important strategy is to form external links, reinforcing the network role we expect to fulfil – apart from EACR, which is our natural anchor and support in Europe, we are organising an ASPIC-ASEICA symposium at our Congress, which hopefully will stand in future meetings of both societies. The success of the ASPIC meeting organised in 2013 (see p. 38) is stimulating us to pursue regular biennial activities on the same line, open to the public, in alternate years with the Congress. And more will come, we hope!

Leonor David
President of ASPIC

“It has not been easy... but we are thriving.”

Leonor David at the ASPIC Conference on the Public Benefit of Cancer Research

For a full report from the conference see p. 38