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## EUROPEAN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION IN ONCOLOGY

### A report of the EORTC Education Branch

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By the year 2000 it is estimated that approximately two million Europeans per year will be afflicted by cancer and that the annual death rate will be of the order of one million. Despite the numerical extent of the problem, the high mortality and the very considerable morbidity associated with uncontrolled cancer, it is the general view of experts in the field that the teaching of oncology to undergraduates remains extremely unsatisfactory in many medical schools.

In recent years there has been substantial progress in cancer research and in the management of cancer patients due to developments in diagnosis and treatment. It is clear that, with available knowledge and technology, screening programmes designed to detect cancers at an earlier stage and programmes of public education aimed at prevention could substantially contribute to a reduction of our present cancer problem.

If the newly-qualified doctor is to be provided with the necessary knowledge and skills to participate as a non-specialist in the prevention, early diagnosis and management of malignant disease, it is essential that attention is focused on the development of a satisfactory curriculum for undergraduate education.

The problem of an integrated undergraduate oncology training programme in Europe was reviewed by a UICC Regional Conference in Oncology held in Cracow in 1972 (1) and subsequently by a UICC/WHO meeting in 1981 (2).

The objective of the Education Branch of the EORTC is to identify requirements for cancer education in Europe at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level. The Education Branch, which was set up in 1986, has directed its attention initially to the problem of undergraduate oncology education and, as a basis for making recommendations,

in 1987 carried out a survey by questioning 165 deans of medical schools in Europe. Of 124 responses received by July 1987, 94 were considered valid, since 30 were either double-registered from the same university or did not concern undergraduate education. The information obtained from 94 medical schools in 14 countries (UK, France, Netherlands, Italy, Germany, Spain, Denmark, Belgium, Portugal, Ireland, Switzerland, Greece, Iceland, Sweden) is summarized in Fig. 1. As shown, approximately 60% of the centres have a course in oncology and a chair in oncology. In some institutions the courses were of a very short duration whereas optional in others. Only 41% of schools reported that they had a curriculum in oncology. Less than 50% had a pre-degree training period (that is a specific allocation of time for oncology in the final clinical year). Only one-third of the schools had an examination in oncology.

It is of interest to examine the schools' preferences for the future evolution of undergraduate education in oncology. Of the universities without corresponding facilities, 86% indicated that they would like a specific course in oncology, 81% a chair in oncology, and 70% a curriculum in oncology. A common European curriculum would be favoured by 95% of all universities (Fig. 2).

A striking finding of the inquiry was the wide variation in educational practice between different universities in the same country (Table). Approximately only 50% of the medical schools in the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain and Denmark, for example, had courses in oncology. There were also substantial differences between individual countries. Thus all 16 French medical schools responding to the inquiry reported a course in oncology, whereas none of the 12 Italian medical schools had such a course. However, the Italian Government has recently approved

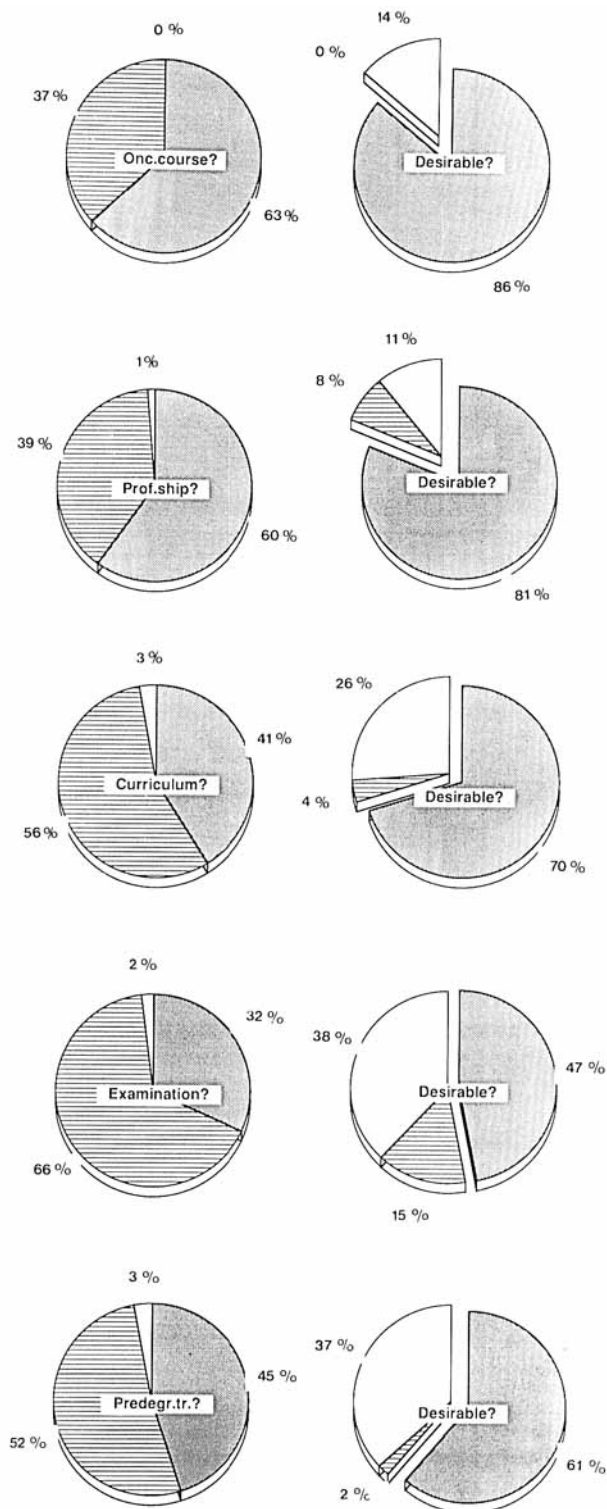


Fig. 1. Presence of facilities for oncology-teaching in Europe (left). The 'yes' (grey), 'no' (striped) and 'no reply' (white) answers are given in percentages of the 94 valid answers. Each main question to the left is followed by a subsequent 'Desirable?'-diagram (right). There the percentages refer to the 'no'-answers in the corresponding main question, i.e. only universities without corresponding facilities have noted whether they consider the lacking facility desirable or not.

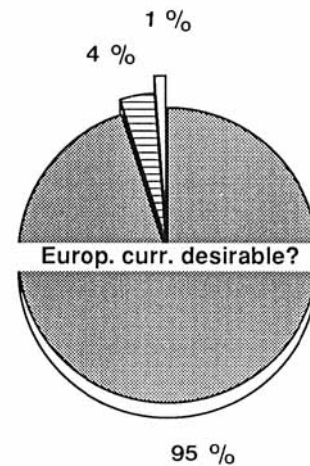


Fig. 2. Percentage of universities considering a mutual European curriculum in oncology as desirable (grey), non-desirable (stripes) and no answer (white).

Table

Oncology courses, professorships, curriculums in oncology, and examinations in oncology given in percentages of the valid answers from each country. The countries are ordered according to the number of valid answers (No.)

Country	No.	Percentage			
		Onc.c.	Prof.s.	Curr.	Exam.
England	20	50	75	40	0
France	16	100	75	63	75
Netherlands	12	92	59	67	42
Italy	12	0	17	10	33
W. Germany	9	67	67	22	22
Spain	5	40	20	60	20
Scotland	4	100	100	25	25
Denmark	3	67	33	0	0
Belgium	3	100	100	33	67
Portugal	3	33	33	33	33
Ireland	2	50	50	50	0
Switzerland	2	50	100	100	50
Greece	1	0	0	0	0
Iceland	1	0	0	0	0
Sweden	1	100	100	100	100

a set of modifications to the medical faculty's programme which introduced a compulsory course in clinical oncology from 1 November 1987 in the fifth year of medical studies.

The findings of this study confirm the generally held view that undergraduate education in oncology is poorly structured at many universities and in a substantial number of institutions even absent. Nevertheless, there is evidence of improvement in recent years since 63% of the universities indicate that they have an oncology course and 60% have a professor of oncology. Since the universities within the ESO network are not necessarily repre-

sentative for the rest of the medical schools in Europe, and since not all institutions responded to the inquiry there may well be a selection bias. A significant finding, however, is the fact that 95% of the medical schools indicated that they would favour a European curriculum for undergraduate education in oncology.

This survey and the findings of similar studies carried out by the organization of European Cancer Institutes and the European Commission's Advisory Committee on Medical Training, provide the basis for a joint EORTC/EC initiative to develop an undergraduate curriculum. The first step in that direction was taken at a preparatory workshop held at the premises of the European School of Oncology in Venice in March 1988, followed by a 2-day meeting, jointly organized by the EC and EORTC, held in

Bonn in May 1988. Both meetings included oncologists and deans of undergraduate medical schools from a majority of the European countries. On the basis of this initiative a paper is being prepared for presentation to the EC in the autumn of 1988. This paper will be published in a coming issue of *Reviews in Oncology*.

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#### REFERENCES

1. UICC Bulletin 10, December 1972.
2. UICC/WHO meeting in Geneva, 6-8 April 1981, EURO Rep. Stud. 49 (1981).