

THE SWISS CANCER LEAGUE SUPPORTS PROJECTS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

PROFESSOR THOMAS CERNY, MD, PAST PRESIDENT OF THE SWISS CANCER LEAGUE, PRESIDENT ONCOSUISSE AND HEAD PHYSICIAN OF ONCOLOGY/HEMATOLOGY, CANTONAL HOSPITAL ST GALLEN, SWITZERLAND (THOMAS.CERNY@KSSG.CH)

The Swiss Cancer League is committed to improving cancer treatment for patients and ensuring equal access to therapies for all cancer patients. As a national organization, most of its resources are used within Switzerland. However, the League has also been supporting several projects in developing countries. These research projects are performed by organizations based in Switzerland committed to improving prevention, early detection and treatment of cancer, as well as care of cancer patients in developing countries. On the initiative of its past president, Professor Franco Cavalli, MD, the first international project was initiated in 1996. Over the years, about one million Swiss francs have been invested mainly in three projects in developing countries. The projects are briefly presented below.

Cameroon: The Burkitt's lymphoma project from Paediatric Oncology in Developing Countries (PODC)

The International Society for Paediatric Oncology (SIOP) is an association of paediatric oncologists. The organization was founded in Zurich, Switzerland, in the late 1960s. It now has an international membership of 1,450 medical professionals. SIOP's vision is that "No child should die of cancer". The SIOP Paediatric Oncology in Developing Countries (PODC) Committee focuses on improving care for children with cancer in developing countries. For further information visit: www.siop-online.org.

The Swiss Cancer League has been supporting projects from the PODC since 2004. Most of the support went on a series of projects focussing on developing effective and affordable treatment for children with endemic Burkitt's lymphoma in Cameroon. Burkitt's lymphoma is a cancer of the lymphatic system. The endemic variant occurs in equatorial Africa and is the most common malignancy in children in this area.

In 2010, the one-year event free survival indicated a better than 60% survival rate, which was a big improvement. The development of effective protocols was made possible as part of a research project that aimed at developing specific solutions to answer the needs of patients in this part of the world using the resources available. As malnutrition at diagnosis is common and is associated with a higher risk of death by infection,

additional protocols are now being developed to further improve the survival rate.

Cuba: Public health projects by mediCuba-Suisse

MediCuba-Suisse is a non-governmental organization that has been supporting public health projects in Cuba since 1992. This association works in close collaboration with AMCA (Associazione di Aiuto Medico al Centro America). For further information visit: www.medicuba.ch.

In Cuba, cancer is the second most common cause of death. Between the 1994 and 2010, the number of cancer patients increased from 20,500 to 27,000 per year. This increase is primarily due to the increase in life expectancy of the Cuban population, now similar to developed countries, but also to progress in early detection. The Swiss Cancer League has been supporting different projects from mediCuba since 2002. First, the Swiss Cancer League supported the construction of an outpatient chemotherapy clinic at the Institute of Oncology in La Havana. Beside this structural contribution, the League has also financed two research-oriented projects, one involving the introduction of palliative care for cancer patients and another described below.

In 2006, due to the increase of cancer incidence and cancer mortality, an operational unit was established within the national programme to fight against cancer (2006–2015) called the Unidad Nacional de Control de Cáncer (UNCC). This programme is based on recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO) for a systemic approach to cancer: all actors engaged in the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of cancer are coordinated at local and central levels and provide information to a cancer observatory. This instrument, which is supported by the Swiss Cancer League, will be used to improve the knowledge management in cancer control.

Nicaragua: The La Mascota twinning programme and the early detection of cervix cancer programme from AMCA (Associazione di Aiuto Medico al Centro America)

The AMCA was founded by medical doctors, nurses and union



representatives more than 25 years ago. Professor Franco Cavalli, MD is the president of this respected association. More information can be found at www.amca.ch. Even though the association supports projects across Central America, it focuses on women and children in Nicaragua.

The La Mascota twinning programme was set up in 1986 by La Mascota children's hospital in Managua, Nicaragua, and hospitals in Monza and Milan, Italy, and Bellinzona, Switzerland. The goal of the programme is to reduce the gap in mortality caused by childhood cancer between developed and developing countries. Originally, this programme focused on acute lymphoblastic leukaemia (ALL) but gradually expanded to include most forms of childhood cancers.

The training of a core group of medical doctors and nurses in Switzerland and Italy was the first step of the programme. The first trained team returned to Nicaragua in 1990, and the first patients were then included in the programme. The cooperation was part of research project with the aim to adapting and assessing treatment protocols to the specific conditions in Nicaragua¹. The Swiss Cancer League became involved in 1996 at the initiative of its past president Franco Cavalli when the programme was opened to new sources of financial support.

The haemato-oncological department of the La Mascota children's hospital now treats 200 new cases of childhood cancer patients each year. The site consists of two divisions with 15 beds in each, as well as two outpatient clinics. The numbers

speak for themselves: today, 60% of the children with ALL are treated successfully². No reliable data was available before the programme started, but very few children received adequate treatment then. Thanks to the commitment of AMCA, the government, as well as the funding from the Swiss Cancer League and a parents association, the haemato-oncological department of the La Mascota children's hospital has become almost self-supporting. One of the lessons learned from this programme is that it is vital for such programmes to have a long-term commitment to a comprehensive and holistic strategy. This approach combines the supply of drugs, training and supervision of health professionals, and the care of the children as well as their parents on site¹.

Another AMCA project supported by the Swiss Cancer League since 2008 is the cervical cancer prevention project at the obstetric hospital Calderón in Managua, Nicaragua. Cervical cancer is the most common neoplastic disease in women in Latin America. Worldwide, nearly 500,000 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer each year. The mortality rate in developing countries is about 80%³, whereas most patients in developed countries get treated successfully. Five years ago, AMCA collaborated with the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC) and the American non-governmental organization PATH (Program for Appropriate Technology in Health) to launch a study in Masaya, a town near Managua, comparing different diagnosis methods (PAP-test, HPV-test and visual inspection with Acetic Acid). The Swiss Cancer League supported this initiative. As a result, the numbers of early cases diagnosed and treated during this period increased dramatically. Again, one reason for the success of this programme was careful long-term planning as well as the development of specific solutions as part of a research plan. ●

¹ Masera G et al. *Lancet*. 1998; 352: 1923-6.

² Cavalli F. *Schweizerische Ärztezeitung*. 2012; 93: 690-2.

³ Cavalli F. *Nature Clinical Practice Oncology*. 2006; 3: 582-3.

About the Swiss Cancer League

The Swiss Cancer League – founded in 1910 – is a nonprofit organization engaged in cancer prevention, the promotion of cancer research and the support for cancer patients and their loved ones. Located in Bern, the League is the national umbrella organization, which unites 19 cantonal and regional leagues. The League is primarily financed by donations and is certified with the ZEWQ quality label. www.swisscancer.ch