

Speech of IARC Director Christopher P. Wild at the celebration of the 50th anniversary of IARC



It is my great pleasure to welcome you to this celebration of the 50th anniversary of the International Agency for Research on Cancer. This is an historic point in the life of the Agency. I have 10 to 15 minutes to describe 50 years of work, so I will not dwell on details; you can read those in the book we have prepared to commemorate this occasion (“IARC: the first 50 years, 1965–

2015”). But I will point to some highlights and to the continued relevance of the organization in the decades ahead.

Although the book is authored by Dr Rodolfo Saracci and me, it has really been written by the hundreds of people who have worked for the Agency or with the Agency from literally every part of the world over the last 50 years. I see many faces today of people who have made important contributions to the successes described. As the Director of the Agency, I stand with you and congratulate you on your contributions to IARC and to reducing the burden of cancer across the world.

However, I hope you will find in the book not only a celebration of the scientific achievements of an organization, but a celebration of humanity: a demonstration of what can be achieved when people of all nations join together with the high aim of improving the lives of others.

The Agency was born of pain. A woman suffered and died from cancer. Her husband, Yves Poggioli, a journalist, was moved through his loss to do something so others did not suffer the same fate. One of the things he did was to contact an acquaintance, Emmanuel d’Astier de la Vigerie, who was at that time in the early 1960s head of the newspaper *Liberation*. Poggioli challenged d’Astier to use his newspaper not only to fight for political freedom but also to fight this terrible disease. D’Astier was touched and in turn he too took action to propose a new international collaborative effort to combat cancer.

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Emmanuel d'Astier went straight to the top. He knew President Charles de Gaulle from shared wartime experiences and so in July 1963 he passed on the idea first formulated by Poggioli: an international cooperation, funded by a small percentage of the money assigned to defence budgets in each of the major nuclear powers.

D'Astier followed his first meeting with an open letter to De Gaulle signed by 12 leading French public figures. The open letter called for a “derisory” 0.5% of the military budgets of France, the USA, the Soviet Union and the UK to be invested in an international cancer institution under the auspices of the United Nations. This organization, the letter stated, would be involved in a “fight for life”.

There was a dual objective in this strategy: to slow, however symbolically, the nuclear arms race and to redirect some of that money away from the instruments of war and towards the purposes of health. It was a call to arms: not to fight each other, but to fight together, against a common enemy. This was the “big idea” which moved President de Gaulle to action.

The decision by the French President took two days. Within a week of the Open Letter, the French Minister of Health had requested and met with the Director-General of WHO and the project for a new international cancer agency was launched – a quite stunning time scale. Two years later, in May 1965, the World Health Assembly made a resolution to establish the International Agency for Research on Cancer, a specialized agency within the WHO but with its own independent governance.

The Agency was initiated by France, Germany, UK, Italy and the USA, immediately joined by Australia and the Soviet Union. Being a part of WHO has been a huge benefit in ensuring IARC's research has impact and visibility; having separate governance has ensured it has been able to fulfil its mission.

A former Director of the Agency, Lorenzo Tomatis, wrote the following: *“It is rare in the history of nations, that one finds good reasons to render homage to the generosity and altruism of governments and those in power: the birth of the IARC presents one of those rare occasions.”*

France was instrumental in the creation of the Agency and France was to be the host country. There have been many French friends of IARC over the years. Emmanuel d'Astier, certainly; Antoine Lacassagne, a leading oncologist and Lyonnais who co-signed the letter with d'Astier; and, crucially, Eugène Aujaleu. It was Professor Aujaleu, the first Director-General of INSERM, who ensured that the “big idea” of this new Agency made its way through the bureaucratic challenges of WHO and the national governments. Raymond Latarjet was another friend: a

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towering figure in French oncology who was Chair of the Scientific Council and gave his name to one of the buildings now occupied by IARC.

The support of the City of Lyon, the Department and Region has been another key strength for the Agency. Louis Pradel was the Mayor when the decision was made to host IARC and he made extensive efforts to this end. In writing the book I had the pleasure of exchanges with Professor George Klein, a member of the original scientific advisory group 50 years ago. Professor Klein clearly remembers the almost constant presence of M. Pradel, alongside the scientific team in Lyon, singing the praises of the city and demonstrating an irrepressible desire to see IARC land in Lyon. IARC moved into the Tower building, inaugurated in 1972 by President Pompidou.

This commitment of Lyon, the Region and the central French Government continues today, and we thank you for your outstanding leadership and support in a period of enormous economic pressures. Because of the vision for Lyon as an international centre of excellence in medical research, IARC can look forward to a fresh era here, housed in a new building fit for such a world-renowned organization, one of only two UN organizations to be headquartered in France.

Certainly the Agency has benefited from its location due to the support of the local clinical, research and academic environment, including the Centre Léon Bérard, the University Hospitals, the Universities, INSERM units and many more. Moreover, the cooperation stretches across France, including many scientists and research infrastructures such as the Cancerpole - CLARA, cancer funding organizations, and notably, the French National Cancer Institute. On behalf of the Agency I formally thank the professional cancer community in France for your valuable support.

IARC's continued presence will undoubtedly add to the cancer research excellence locally, but let me add that in assuring the future of IARC, the City, the Region and the central French government is making a generous contribution to reducing cancer in some of the most under-privileged parts of the world. This solidarity is admirable and is in the best of French traditions.

What do we do? IARC has made many major contributions to cancer research over 40 years. Unfortunately I cannot dwell on these in any depth but let me mention a few highlights from the book.

A major focus has been on accurately describing the burden of cancer globally. There was a recognition that the number and types of cancer differ between places and over time. This led to an emphasis on working in partnership with national experts to obtain more accurate information on the occurrence of cancer. How can you make plans for cancer control if you

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don't know what type and how many cancers are occurring? The Agency remains the international reference point for the statistics on cancer occurrence worldwide.

A second major area has been to understand what causes cancer, sometimes starting from observations of striking geographic differences within just a few tens of kilometres – one early example was that of the much higher rates of oesophageal cancer in northern France than elsewhere. Here the Agency was a pioneer by insisting on the value of integrating epidemiology and laboratory research to achieve its goals. A major contribution has come through the IARC Monographs programme, which assesses all the evidence as to whether a particular agent causes human cancer or not: the results are used by governments worldwide for regulatory decision-making.

The Agency has made significant findings on the role of tobacco (including through passive smoking) and this helped inform the first international public health treaty: the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. There are more examples in genetics, infections, diet and obesity, and many chemicals in the workplace and in the environment. One outstanding example is establishing the causative role of human papillomavirus in cervical cancer. This work of global significance has led to development of a vaccine to protect women against this cancer and new methods for the early detection and successful treatment of the disease.

In recent years the Agency has also worked increasingly on the early detection of cancer to enable better treatment. This is most important in developing countries, where all too often cancer is still routinely seen at an advanced stage. We know that even less sophisticated health services can offer success in treatment if the cancers are detected early.

We are privileged to have with us today two persons who have been instrumental in driving the development of cancer early detection and treatment services in their countries: Her Royal Highness Princess Lalla Salma in Morocco and Her Royal Highness Princess Dina Mired in Jordan have demonstrated what can be achieved when access is gained to quality cancer treatment in a developing country.

Permeating all that IARC does is training: training of the next generation of cancer researchers across the world. Thousands of researchers have benefited from this commitment over five decades, including many young French scientists who have their first taste of international cancer research at the Agency.

The Agency has an exceptional reputation. If I may, I would like to add a personal note in this regard. When I arrived at IARC for the first time at 25 years of age I was impressed, of course,

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by the research. But there was something else which permeated the organization. What was done was matched by a strong sense of how it should be done. There was an “IARC way”: characterized by a generosity towards national partners; special support to under-privileged populations; and a determination to ensure freedom from conflicts of interest so that scientific truth could stand up to powerful vested interests. As a young scientist this behaviour inspired and challenged me, it shaped me – and I was just one among many.

This “IARC way” derived initially no doubt from the vision of the governments who supported the Agency. The Governing Council encouraged a global mission, showing generosity to those beyond their own borders. The Governing Council members supported the integrity and independence of IARC despite strong pressures at times from industries and others with strong vested interests. The vision of the Governing Council for IARC remains a crucial element in its continued success.

In recent years we have seen the geographic representation on the Governing Council grow. India, Korea, Austria, Turkey, Brazil and Qatar have joined forces in recent years with the ongoing support from existing Participating States, bringing in fresh views and impetus. On Wednesday we saw Morocco join IARC – the first country from the African continent to do so. It is an historic step and I thank the Ministry of Health and I thank Her Royal Highness Princess Lalla Salma for her inspiration, her leadership and her humanity in showing how we can be stronger together.

The Agency has achieved a lot, but its mission – to reduce the global burden of cancer – is more relevant today than ever before. The cancer burden is growing as the world’s populations grow and age. We cannot treat our way out of the cancer problem. Cancer prevention has to be a major part of the response and that is where IARC is positioned – to see research translated into effective prevention measures.

IARC’s priority areas will be further developed one year from now in a major scientific conference in Lyon organized by the Agency. The conference will bring some of the most renowned experts in the world to Lyon for a week in June 2016 to discuss the occurrence, causes and prevention of cancer worldwide. As well as high-quality science, we intend to find sponsorship to bring 50 future cancer leaders from low- and middle-income countries for leadership training and networking. Fifty: one for each year of the history of IARC. People who can make a difference in the future, with the support and encouragement of this Agency.

IARC never did obtain the original budget based on the military money. We lost the battle, but we won the war. We won the war because a principle of more fundamental importance was

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adopted – to work together across boundaries to achieve a common goal. This has been the success of the Agency and this remains the foundation for its future.

Of course IARC is focused on its specific role in cancer research. However, when one takes a step back, on days such as today, and one looks at this Agency in the context of so many conflicts, within and among societies, it is not fanciful to think that what IARC achieves is far more than research.

With its 300 personnel from 50 countries, working with thousands more from every part of the world towards a common goal, to improve the lives of people everywhere, it shows another way to be. I dare to say: it shows a better way to be. Perhaps that example was also what Emmanuel d’Astier and his co-signatories had in mind, and what President de Gaulle had in mind when he decided this idea should be born.

In closing I make reference to the reply of Charles de Gaulle to the 12 French public figures on the 9th of November 1963. He considered that the new international cancer research institution embodied three aspirations: cooperation between peoples, the improvement of the human condition, and the advancement of science. I hope that somewhere these words may be written in stone, into the very fabric of the new building which will take the Agency into its second 50 years. But, more importantly I hope that these words will be a guide to all those associated with this Agency in the future: those who work for it, those who work with it and those responsible for it.

Thank you for your attention.