



Commentary

FECS 20th Birthday—A survivor speaks

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Ageing is a ruthless fact of life. By chance, it is usually a sneaky process. This helps you to forget about it. Unfortunately there is often an unexpected event to cruelly bring you back to reality. The invitation to write a few pages about the history of the Federation of European Cancer Societies (FECS) was one of these irritating events: Was it possible that I would be one of the few alive and active witnesses of the birth and evolution of FECS up until today? I had to accept the fact that this was the case.

As strange as it may seem for those who recently attended ECCO 11 in Lisbon, the European landscape for international oncology meetings was almost a desert twenty years ago. One had to travel to the USA to attend large oncology meetings. In fact, except for the UICC meeting taking place somewhere in the world every four years, most of them almost exclusively focused on one discipline: radiation, surgery or chemotherapy, or were built from an organ-oriented approach. The word ‘oncology’ was barely used and the concept of a multidisciplinary oncology meeting was incredibly late to emerge, although cancer hospitals over the world had shown for decades that the synergy of medical disciplines was the only way to deliver an optimal service to the cancer patient.

From the mid-sixties to the late seventies, a number of international ‘clubs’ of specialists gradually evolved into formalised groups of specialists in cancer diagnosis and treatment. Interestingly, whenever they existed, national societies were bypassed by these groups for two reasons: the language barrier and the fear of losing their power, which prevented these national societies from merging and raised such complicated issues that the obvious and difficult decision was to start a European society from scratch. Hence, and this is essential to understand what happened next, ESMO in 1975 (European Society of Medical Oncology), ESTRO in 1980 (European Society of Therapeutic Radiology and Oncology) and ESSO in 1981 (European Society of Surgical Oncology) were constituted by voluntary individuals possessing a strong European spirit, who were not always the recognised leaders in their own countries. This is the fate of most pioneers.

Since I have the privilege to be the first historian of FECS, I will take the liberty to describe its young life in three periods, following the nearly fifteen-year pregnancy that I just briefly outlined.

A four-year delivery: from the first meeting in Lausanne in 1981, to the third in Stockholm in 1985

The concept of a ‘European ASCO-like’ meeting was debated but none of the existing groups were prepared to give up their own yearly meeting or to create a ‘supra-multidisciplinary society’. The initiative to organise the first European Conference of Clinical Oncology should be credited to Umberto Veronesi, a leading surgical oncologist who had organised the 1974 UICC conference in Firenze and just launched ESSO. The concept of FECS was embryonal; as I was reminded by Bob Pinedo, “The ‘Board’ was made from a group of friends around a lunch table...”.

Anyhow, the first European Clinical Oncology Conference was attended by 1000 people on 29–31 October 1981, mostly by medical oncologists although the three clinical cancer societies (ESMO, ESTRO, ESSO) were equally associated in the ECCO venture and thus can be considered as founding members. Other partners joined in this early period contributing to the scientific programme of ECCO 2. They complied with the full membership rules somewhat later: in 1984 for EONS (European Oncology Nursing Society), in 1991 for EACR (the European Association of Cancer Research) and 1997 for the European branch of SIOP (International Society of Paediatric Oncology).

ECCO 2 took place in Amsterdam in 1983. Although Umberto Veronesi would deserve the honour to be considered the first FECS President, there was not yet such a title since FECS did not formally exist. Herbert Pinedo was the conference chairman, in charge of the organisation of the Amsterdam meeting. The attendance grew to 1500 with the consequence that the collusion of the cancer societies was creating a spirit that no single society could generate. The formal birth of FECS may be dated from the first Board meeting held

in Amsterdam and the election of Bob Pinedo as the FECS President.

The spark that ignited the motor of the second stage of the rocket occurred in Stockholm in 1985. The attendance doubled and for the first time, the member societies agreed upon the missions of FECS:

“The FECS, under the auspices of which ECCO meetings are organised was intended to be a unique structure not to replace the activities of the Societies, but to enhance their interactions and to develop what none of the members could afford or represented alone”.

FECS was then starting the second phase of its growth.

From infancy to adolescence (1985–1993)

At this time, the chairman of the previous ECCO meeting became the FECS President up until the next meeting two years later. This was in fact a four-year commitment to FECS, first with a heavy burden as the local ECCO organiser and then the task to build up the Federation with a light infrastructural support. Hence, the late Jerzy Einhorn, chairman of the Stockholm meeting was the 1986–1987 FECS President. A very convincing leader with a rare mixture of sharpness of analysis, nobleness and diplomacy, he was also a firm-decision maker. Like Umberto Veronesi in Italy, Jerzy Einhorn would later become a very popular Swedish Minister of Health.

FECS was starting to exist by itself and became the major exchange platform for oncology disciplines. This growing awareness of the boost provided by the multi-disciplinary interactions pushed up the ECCO 4 attendance in Madrid (1987) to 4000. The FECS success story became the pride of member societies under the presidencies of Hernandez Cortes-Funes (1988–1989), Mike Peckham (1990–1991) and once more Umberto Veronesi (1992–1993). Another major step forward decided in 1985 became effective in 1989: full member societies gave up their annual meeting in the ECCO years, thus providing their memberships with a stronger incentive to attend the ECCO meetings. The ECCO conferences of London (1989), Firenze (1991) and Jerusalem (1993) accrued increasing attendances from 3500 to about 5000 delegates.

So, if you have read this summary of the FECS saga carefully, you should be asking yourself what so far hidden reason helped FECS to move into the third step of any initiation process?

From adolescence to adulthood (1993 to nowadays)

Again, I shall use the freedom of the historian to suggest a personal answer. The main individual respon-

sible for this metamorphosis had up until that time acted silently as an indispensable link ensuring the continuity and coherence of the impulse given by the successive presidents. He was also a tireless negotiator between the changing representatives of the founding societies, who were sometimes unaware of the original spirit of the pioneers and anxious of the growing fame and influence of FECS. This pioneer among the pioneers was the late Emmanuel van der Schueren (1942–1998). He understood first that FECS needed a permanent infrastructure not only to act as a professional congress organiser but also to be the promoter of new activities allowing the subsidiarity of the member societies. Emmanuel van der Schueren was given the first FECS Clinical Research Award in London (1989). He deserved it better than anyone else not only because of his scientific achievements, but in recognition of having been the most dedicated craftsman of the Federation, before and during his functions as FECS Secretary General (1989–1995). By creating an embryonal FECS Conference Unit in 1991 in Leuven, the managerial and financial autonomy of the Federation quickly grew to provide the member societies with a powerful tool enabling ideas for joint ventures and for most of them, enhanced resources through sharing the profits of well-organised ECCO conferences. The Paris meeting in 1995, the first fully organised by FECS, was a landmark in the history of cancer meetings. For the first time, the attendance of a European meeting reached a gigantic scale, previously only imaginable in North America: 8000 people. This number was reproduced in Hamburg (1997) and further increased to 9000 in Vienna (1999).

From 1991 to 1994, a boiling activity was taking place in the few crowded rooms allocated to the FECS/ECCO activities, in the old department of radiation oncology of the University of Leuven. Wisely, the 1994–1995 FECS President Allan van Oosterom took a sharp decision which at this time was not understood by everybody: to move to Brussels, in the same building already hosting the EORTC. This 1994 move was essential for the FECS staff identity and spirit. Since 1991, there had been a close co-operation and interaction with the more experienced ESTRO staff.

From 1994 on, FECS was launched as an independent vessel. Two outstanding close collaborators of Emmanuel van der Schueren headed the new FECS permanent staff: Phylip Pritchard in charge of ESTRO and FECS since 1991 was hired as FECS Chief Administrator. Kris Vantongelen, Head of the oncology clinical trials office at Leuven brought her experience to the key position of ECCO Conference and Programme manager. Two strategy meetings took place in Dijon in 1994 and 1996. The recommendations from brainstorming sessions outlined in the FECS 1995–2000 strategic plan are still being implemented today. The legal background was consolidated in 94 under the form of an international

association in accordance with Belgian law. The next few years witnessed a burst of new ventures in the field of education (Accreditation Council of Oncology in Europe, ACOE), public relations with professional organisations, and the European Commission promoting FECS as the most representative partner of multi-disciplinary oncology. Under the joint leadership of Luc Hendrickx and Kris Vantongelen, the Conference Unit attained a highly professional level of skill and was involved with new conference commitments for the member societies. It was under the leadership of FECS, and with the personal support of Umberto Veronesi and Manu van der Schueren that the successful EORTC Breast Cancer Working Conference was transformed into an innovative and even more successful formula: the European Breast Cancer Conferences (EBCC) a joint effort of EORTC, EUSOMA and Europa Donna, supported and organised by FECS.

I had the privilege to serve FECS as President from 1996 to 1997 and to prepare the ECCO 9 in Hamburg with the excellent support of Christian Herfarth. The co-operation with the FECS staff left me with one of the most vivid memories of sharing enthusiasm and imagination to strengthen, broaden, and improve the FECS service to an increasing number of member societies (full members and affiliated members). Day-to-day FECS life also gave me an insight on the sometimes difficult dilemma of being at the same time 'above' to coordinate and 'below' to serve member societies.

Under the presidencies of Niall O'Higgins (1998–1999) and Dieter Hossfeld (2000–2001), FECS materialized some of the long-term projects already initiated. The late Michael Price (who left us last November 2000) will remain associated with these achievements for all the energy and time he dedicated to FECS as a secretary General (1997–2000) with increased duties after the departure of Philip Pritchard. The FECS Constitution and Byelaws were revised and updated in 1998. The FECS Education and Training Committee has now activated the Accreditation Council of Oncology in Europe (ACOE). In 2000, FECS received support from the European Commission in the framework of the Leonardo da Vinci Programme, to develop a project on CME covering a three-year period.

To conclude, although I'm not the authorised person to speak about the future of FECS, I shall once more abuse the freedom of the historian. Did FECS reach adulthood? I would dare to say 'not yet' in the sense that an adult scientist should remain a lifetime student to have a chance to contribute to progress. The combination of disciplines and talents provides FECS with an almost endless reservoir of scientific, medical and managerial personalities to ensure a healthy turnover of its governing bodies (Council, Board, Standing Committees). Paradoxically, one of the challenges of FECS is to benefit from being the melting pot of an ever-changing flow of officers while maintaining a steady strategy based upon actions (other than ECCOs) often needing a decade from concept to activation. Conversely, FECS must react within hours whenever the oncology community needs to speak with a single voice to provide a reference opinion to the general public, journalists or politicians on one of the many expected or unexpected cancer issues raised almost every week. This is essential to the recognition of FECS by insiders and outsiders. Although these goals have been identified for a long time, they probably could be implemented with more efficacy and flexibility. Part of the solution lies within FECS, the other part being among the full appropriation of FECS missions by member societies.

On the positive side, the present challenge of FECS is how to manage success. The scientific level and conviviality of ECCO 11 in Lisbon should further strengthen the FECS spirit. All European builders of the Federation, laboratory researchers, nurses, cancer specialists from all disciplines will once more share with the FECS staff the pride of having accomplished another step forward to the benefit of cancer patients. We all know this is an endless enterprise.

Publisher's note

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