

Editorial

‘Onco-tourism’—season ticket, anyone?

Happy New Year! 2004 celebrates the 40th anniversary of the *European Journal of Cancer* and we will be producing a Special Issue to reflect on some of the extraordinary changes that have occurred over the past 40 years in cancer and its management. The 40th anniversary issue will discuss changes in scientific understanding and its applications to management, but one of the most interesting and controversial debates amongst the oncology community that will not be discussed there is the concept of ‘onco-tourism’—the development of ever increasing numbers—and size—of international meetings for those of us engaged in cancer: scientists, doctors, nurses and a wide range of professionals from allied disciplines.

The Christmas and New Year holidays are times when it is absolutely legitimate to switch off the e-mail, escape the office, hospital or laboratory for well-deserved time off. But how many of you already have your 2004 diaries peppered with meetings—short, long, nearby, overseas, specialist group meetings, interdisciplinary comprehensive state of the art, workshop, educational, political and so on. 40 years ago there were relatively few international meetings, especially large meetings, certainly nothing to compare with the 10 000 strong ECCO meeting held last September in Copenhagen (the first ECCO meeting in Lausanne in 1981 had only a few hundred attendees). We have witnessed a huge growth in national meetings, specialist and multidisciplinary; the professional societies have developed international meetings which grow from strength to strength and there would appear to be an ever-increasing number of proposals for yet further expansion of what has perhaps mischievously been called ‘onco-tourism’. Why has this happened and is it all to the good? The answer to the former is obvious and positive. Greater awareness of the importance of cancer, greater success in its treatment and, most particularly, greater involvement of financial backers—especially the pharmaceutical industry—have provided the infrastructure to support this burgeoning enterprise.

Are there any down sides to all of this?—possibly so. Some people think that size does not matter—but conference organisers know better! Finding venues that can successfully host the 10 000+ delegates for huge con-

ferences is not a problem exclusive to Europe, but the bigger the event, the greater the challenge to encourage true debate and the exchange of (relatively rare) key new information. The reasons for holding large conferences are not confined to the dissemination of new knowledge and certainly there is real value in the professional/social intercourse afforded by such meetings, and the opportunity for academia and industry to interact in a creative and open way. Small workshop meetings or multidisciplinary meetings focused on a particular cancer, or scientific technology, have a different *raison d’être*—equally valid, and some of these meetings (for example, with breast cancer or colon cancer) are now becoming very large. Where lies the problem then? The answer is that most of us have a day job! If you survey the 2004 calendar of cancer conferences there is a (legitimate) excuse to be away from base for an awesome amount of the year. As individuals, we have different reasons for selecting the meetings that we will attend, but collectively should we not reflect on the ‘trend’ for ‘onco-tourism’ to outstrip the scientific/financial/political/social value of too much of this activity?

Programming of meetings needs planning decisions several years in advance and I want to bring this theme to people’s attention now so that, if we, the oncological community, wish to influence the number, scale and further expansion of meetings, there is advance opportunity to do so. Opinions can differ very widely and, although we do not publish correspondence in the *EJC*, if any of you wish to write/e-mail me with your opinions on this I would be grateful for the widest possible consultation. ‘Onco-tourism’, like cancer, is not going to go away and the start of a new year seems a good time to reflect on this. If I am out of the office, you will know why!

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