

Putting cancer on the global agenda

→ Páraic Réamonn*

The International Union Against Cancer has launched a childhood cancer campaign to show that better awareness, early detection and appropriate treatment can make a difference in the developing world.

Cancer is largely a disease of affluent and aging industrialised populations, and fighting cancer is well beyond the means of any developing country. These two dangerous misconceptions between them share a large part of the blame for the absence of cancer from health policies for the emerging world over recent decades. More than half of all new cases of cancer occur in the developing world. Many of them could be treated successfully if caught early enough. Many more could be prevented.

Six years ago, the World Summit Against Cancer in the New Millennium called for “an invincible alliance between researchers, health-care professionals, patients, government, industry and media to fight

cancer and its greatest allies which are fear, ignorance and complacency,” and urged that, each year, 4 February be observed as World Cancer Day.

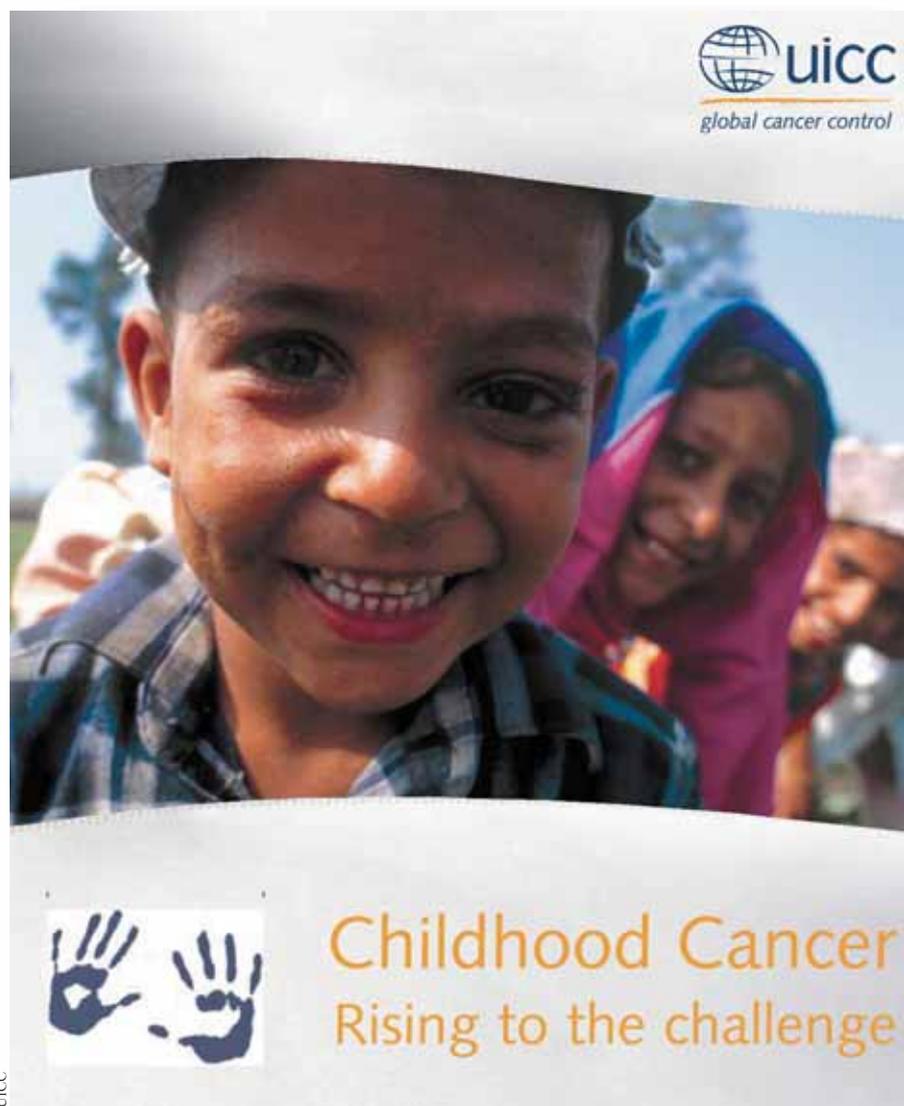
The appearance of the first ever resolution on cancer prevention and control on the agenda of the World Health Assembly last year is an encouraging sign that things are moving in the right direction. But it takes more than a resolution to change the reality on the ground. This is why, three years ago, the International Union Against Cancer (UICC) committed itself to promoting World Cancer Day as part of a global campaign “to raise awareness of the cancer burden and to promote cancer control and patient needs in all countries throughout the world”, and last year it launched its own World Cancer Campaign – starting with the ‘My Child Matters’ initiative on childhood cancers.

STARTING WITH THE CHILDREN

Last November, the My Child Matters initiative awarded grants to 14 childhood cancer projects in 10 resource-constrained countries – Bangladesh, Egypt, Honduras, Morocco, the Philippines, Senegal, Tanzania, Ukraine, Venezuela and Vietnam. The projects were financed by sanofi-aventis, with top-up funding from the US National Cancer Institute making it possible to fund 14 projects instead of the 10 originally proposed.

Why the focus on children? “Childhood cancer is a small fraction of the global cancer burden, yet for children with cancer and their families it can be deeply distressing,” explains Isabel Mortara, UICC’s executive director. “This is especially so in poorer countries, where childhood cancer is often detected too late to be treated effectively and appropriate treatment is often not available or affordable.”

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In such countries, she notes, three out of every five children with cancer will die. But given the minimal conditions for early detection and correct treatment, many of these children could be saved.

Here, relatively little money can make a big difference. “We start with the children,” says Franco Cavalli, who chairs the My Child Matters committee and will take over as UICC’s president at the World Cancer Congress in Washington DC

this July, “because by demonstrating that we can cure children, we show that we can do something against cancer.”

ADVOCATING

In Calgary this March, Stéphane Lambiel of Switzerland held on to the world figure-skating title he won in Moscow last year. In between the two championships, he agreed to serve as an ambassador in UICC’s childhood cancer campaign. “Cancer

is a terrible thing at any age, but especially among the very young,” Lambiel says. “My heart goes out to those children in many countries – the little princes and princesses of our world – who get cancer but don’t get the early diagnosis and prompt and effective treatment they need to save their lives.”

Another advocate for children with cancer is Barbara Bush, the former United States First Lady, who lost her daughter Robin to leukaemia. Also supporting the My Child Matters initiative are two European football legends – England’s Gary Lineker and Germany’s Franz Beckenbauer. Lineker’s oldest son is a childhood leukaemia survivor. “My family and I are proud to support a campaign that aims to raise awareness of childhood cancer,” he says. “We believe that children with cancer should never stop having hope and dreaming of their future life.”

EDUCATING

As part of the My Child Matters initiative, UICC recently published a special report, *Childhood Cancer: Rising to the Challenge*. With two chapters by the International Agency for Research on Cancer, a third chapter by the International Psycho-Oncology Society, and an introduction by Tim Eden, the president of the International Society of Paediatric Oncology (SIOP), it gives a glimpse of the “invincible alliance” called for six years ago.

A second report, making a comprehensive analysis of the chain of care in paediatric oncology in the 10 countries initially selected in the initiative, with proposals to improve the allocation of resources, will be published later.

The My Child Matters initiative will last for at least three years, with



Claudia Sánchez Machuca from the Dr Luis Razetti Oncological Institute in Caracas, Venezuela, and Mhamed Harif of the Moroccan Society of Haematology and Paediatric Oncology, speaking at the launch of 'My Child Matters' in Paris last February. They represented two of the 14 institutions who received grants from the campaign

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projects in five more countries selected for funding this year.

UICC hopes that over the years, the projects supported will do more than show what can be done – they will serve as a wake-up call for politicians and decision-makers for whom cancer is often still not a priority.

UICC's campaign comes at an opportune moment. For years, developing countries have regarded cancer and other chronic diseases as a priority – for richer nations. Not any longer.

Following the resolution at the World Health Assembly last May, the

World Health Organization published a landmark report entitled *Preventing Chronic Diseases: a Vital Investment*.

In this report, WHO proposes a new global goal: to reduce the projected trend of chronic disease death rates by 2% each year until 2015. If achieved, this would avert over 8 million deaths due to cancer in the next decade.

Richard Horton, the editor of the *Lancet*, introducing an influential series of *Lancet* articles on what he calls the “neglected epidemic” of chronic disease, says, “While the

political fashions have embraced some diseases – HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis, in particular – many other common conditions remain marginal to the mainstream of global action on health. Chronic diseases are among those neglected conditions.”

It seems that fashions are changing. With World Cancer Day and its World Cancer Campaign, UICC is determined to see that they do.

Founded in 1933, UICC (www.uicc.org) is the only international non-governmental organisation that is dedicated exclusively to the global control of cancer. For further information, contact info@uicc.org