

Promoting of Oncology Training and Education in India: Lessons from our unique oncology continuing medical education project

The Indian Cooperative Oncology Network is a public charitable trust [ICON (Indian cooperative Oncology Network) Trust] that is working since 1999. One of the mission statements is to optimize the outcome of cancer patients. Today, only about a third of all cancers diagnosed in India get cured. This is at the time when cure rates in some developed countries have risen to 65%. One of the main challenges in India is the advanced stage of the cancer at the time of presentation to the center of excellence or the regional cancer center. Hence ICON Trust decided to focus on this aspect by initiating the Promoting of Oncology Training and Education project via continuing medical educations (CME's) across India.

Promoting of Oncology Training and Education began in the year 2008. Initially, about 100 oncologists got together to discuss and finalize the agenda, scope, execution and monitoring of the program. A fixed agenda, speaker notes and PowerPoint presentation slides were decided upon by experts in the field. The evaluation process (pre and post CME) for each session was also frozen. These oncologists served as faculty, with the senior most from each region of the country taking on the mantle of Program Directors. The programs were directed specifically at the healthcare professionals who were most likely to see a cancer patient first, the family physicians (general practitioners [GPs]).

Each program was a full day event with a focus on current epidemiology and future projections, early signs of cancer, common cancers, counseling, practical demonstrations and finally a general panel discussion. About 100 GPs were registered for each program. They were administered an initial multiple choice questions (MCQs) test to document their baseline understanding. At the end of the program, the same MCQs were repeated, and the difference documented the benefit of the program. A total of 202 such programs has been conducted in the last 7 years, spanning the length and breadth of India benefiting 17,242 GPs and other physicians. At the end of the 1st year, the expert group met to take stock

of the program and the agenda, slides and speaker notes were fine-tuned based on the discussions among the faculty and feedback from the participating GPs. Subsequently, the program was expanded to include organ-specific cancers (lung cancer for chest physicians, women cancers for gynecologists and head neck cancers for ENT surgeons).

The success of this program led to a successful collaboration between ICON Trust and the Ministry of Health, Government of India. ICON Trust was then able to roll out an oncology training program ratified by the government for all the 336 medical colleges of India. So far 26 such programs have been successfully completed involving 2987 students.

We plan to continue expanding this activity and continue modifying it as necessary. We will cover healthcare professionals in other areas and am sure that this will ultimately lead to early diagnosis of cancer and their timely referral to appropriate centers capable of imparting potentially curative therapy. We thank Dr. Reddys for consistently supporting this activity over the last 7 years and encourage others (scientific medical organizations, as well as healthcare industry) to roll out such programs in the interest of our nation's health.

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