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MIDDLE EAST CANCER CONSORTIUM FIGHTS A COMMON ENEMY

The Ministers of Health of Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority formed a historic partnership May 20, 1996 with the official signing in Geneva of the Middle East Cancer Consortium (MECC) agreement.

This is one of the first regional agreements to be signed in the Middle East. It builds on the significant political breakthrough in the Middle East peace process, particularly since the signing of the Israeli-PLO Declaration of Principles.

Donna Shalala, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the official U.S. representative, witnessed the signing at the U.S. Mission in Geneva, Switzerland. Richard Klausner, M.D., Director of the National Cancer Institute (NCI), which played a major role in orchestrating the agreement, was also present.

"I am very pleased that our National Cancer Institute will play an important part in the Middle East Cancer Consortium," stated Secretary Shalala, at the inauguration. "This Consortium will help build bridges of understanding and teamwork so that, together, we can defeat one of our greatest enemies: cancer."

The MECC is an official, inter-governmental organization aimed at increasing knowledge about cancer and decreasing its burdens for the people of the Middle East. Its main objective is "to promote and support cooperation in the Middle East in cancer control," the agreement states.

In a region where few countries maintain cancer registries, especially population based ones, and cancer statistics are scarce, MECC's main areas of focus will include cancer surveillance, information, and education. The Consortium will also concentrate on training, basic research, enhancing public health and patient care, quality control, and international communications. On the clinical side, cooperation may involve basic and applied research, and include programs of clinical guidelines and protocols.

By linking cancer research and treatment facilities, and allowing for the exchange and sharing of unique expertise and knowledge, the Consortium will help save resources, already scarce in many of the participating countries. The sharing of information and resources could also reduce the cost of providing cancer care, a consequence welcomed by those governments that have to pay for many of their citizens' tertiary health care, but cannot afford to establish and maintain the necessary facilities.

One of the potential benefits to the international scientific community will be the prompt availability of summaries of the results from cooperative research projects. These will be published in English and made readily accessible to the public.

NCI's role in the establishment of MECC is another of the Institute's ongoing efforts to support and encourage cooperation among cancer researchers and practicing oncologists in the Middle East region. In 1994, NCI played a pivotal role in the creation of the Middle East Cancer Society (MECS). While MECC is an inter- governmental body, the slightly older MECS is a regional, scientific society, a nongovernmental organization that encourages the collaborative efforts of the region's cancer researchers and oncologists. Since its inception, MECS has held meetings and assigned task forces on lymphoma, cancer registration and epidemiology, breast cancer, pediatric oncology, and quality assurance.

It was the Society's initial progress and its members' enthusiasm that moved Dr. Klausner, and the Israeli Minister of Health, Ephraim Sneh, M.D., to call for a meeting in November 1995 with representatives from Cyprus, Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, and Turkey. Those discussions, followed by others, resulted in the signing and creation of MECC. As stated in the MECC agreement, there will be much cooperation and coordination between the two organizations "to accomplish the common goal of scientific regional collaboration." Most of the Society's members are from parties to the Consortium.

MECC funding will be based on contributions made by the member parties. The National Institutes of Health of the United States will also contribute initial financial support. These funds will be aimed at helping premier institutions, such as universities and cancer centers, in the Middle East develop 1) cancer registries; 2) cancer information dissemination programs; and 3) training programs in cancer research, education, and patient care.

MECC will be governed by a Ministerial Steering Committee (comprising the ministers of health of the Consortium members), responsible for overall policies; and a Board of Governors (comprising representatives appointed by each of the parties, and the United States, responsible for financial and managerial policies. The NCI director will serve on the Board as the U.S. representative. Administration of daily activities will be carried out by an executive director appointed by the Board.

Membership in the Middle East Cancer Consortium is not limited to the founding members, and can be expanded to include other countries in the region. As a full-fledged member, a country must contribute to the Consortium fund, and name a representative on the Ministerial Steering Committee and Board of Governors.