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A strategy for young members within national radiation oncology societies: the Italian experience (AIRO Giovani group)

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ABSTRACT

Aim: To briefly review history, structure, past events and future projects of AIRO (Associazione Italiana Radioterapia Oncologica) young group (AIRO Giovani), focusing on its specific commitment to multidisciplinary networking among junior clinical oncologists at a national and international level.

Background: AIRO Giovani is a part of AIRO composed by members under 40 years old. Its main activities are scientific and educational meetings dedicated to young Italian radiation oncologists and collaborative research projects.

Materials and Methods: AIRO Giovani structure, events organized and supported by AIRO giovani as well as scientific activities are here reported from its creation in 2007 up to current days.

Results: AIRO Giovani group was able to create a consolidated network between Italian junior radiation oncologists, while opening the possibility to collaborate with junior groups of other national scientific societies in the field of oncology and with ESTRO young members. Scientific projects carried out by the group have been successful and will be further implemented in next years.

Conclusions: AIRO Giovani is still in its infancy, but its early positive experience supports the creation and development of young groups within national radiation oncology societies.

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1. Aim and Background

In recent years, the field of radiation oncology (RO) has experienced noteworthy developments in every branch, namely diagnosis and imaging, computer-aided and information technology, molecular and clinical radiobiology, multidisciplinary approach, treatment planning and radiation delivery, combined modality therapy, supportive and palliative care.^{1–3} Thus, in a continuous effort to build up interactive communication and working structures between different oncology specialists in order to favour an inter-professional approach to cancer, international and national radiation oncology societies play a key role.^{4–6} Within these societies, young members represent an integral part of the willingness to create bridges among research, patient management and education in order to finally improve cancer care.⁷ We herein present a brief depiction of the Young component of the Italian Association of Radiation Oncology (AIRO), focusing on activities dedicated to the promotion of young RO specialists in the field of clinical oncology.

2. Materials and methods

We retrospectively reviewed young AIRO scientific, networking and social activities that took place between 2007 and 2011, providing a comprehensive description of its commitment, vision and strategic approach.

3. Results

3.1. Organization, aims and activities

AIRO, Associazione Italiana Radioterapia Oncologica, is a scientific society that gathers together as members a vast majority of board certified radiation oncologists in Italy as well as residents in radiation oncology studying and working in several University Hospitals, Cancer Centres and General Hospitals all over the country. With approximately 700 members, AIRO is a scientific and professional society with primary aims of promoting progress of radiation oncology in Italy as a medical discipline, education, integration with other specialties in the field of clinical oncology and cancer imaging, institutional and health management issues dealing with the development and quality of care of radiation therapy. AIRO Giovani (AIRO young) is a group of AIRO members below 40 years old, officially founded in 2007 under the AIRO Presidency of G. Biti (Head of Radiation Oncology Department at Florence University). The idea of creating a group characterized only by members' age was a consequence of the number of young Italian radiation oncologists participating in the activities of the society at a regional and national level and the need for creating network connections between junior physicians working in different institutions throughout the country to further progress and to deal with the complexity of modern radiation oncology. Currently, AIRO Giovani has approximately 350 members, and every year about 90 new residents begin their educational program in Italy, most of them being part of the society during their residency years.

AIRO Giovani working activities are run by a board of 6 members elected every 2 years by young members, including a coordinator, a past-coordinator and 4 councillors. The board promotes and organizes an annual scientific national event dedicated to young members, and thereafter is responsible for the young scientific session of the annual AIRO national meeting. AIRO Giovani activities started in 2007 with a dedicated session within the national annual AIRO meeting, and then independently in 2008 with the first meeting completely organized by young members in June in Forte dei Marmi, Tuscany. Approximately 100 young members attended the first meeting in 2008 and the number has been increasing over the years. Since 2008, every year a summer meeting has been held in different cities (Florence, Siena, Rome) until 2011, and the 2012 meeting will be held in Milan, together with the national meeting of AIRB, the Italian society of radiation biology, traditionally working very close to the field of radiation oncology. Every year during these one-day full meetings, young members have the opportunity to present original research papers on different topics, selected by the board of AIRO Giovani, in a friendly and passionate atmosphere that would be probably difficult to set-up in a bigger meeting, giving to a lot of residents and young AIRO members the chance to share for the first time, with other colleagues at the same career level, results, problems and ideas in the field of clinical, biological and technological research in radiation oncology in Italy. A social event is always organized at the end of the meeting. The annual scientific session dedicated to AIRO Giovani in the national meeting gives the board the opportunity to propose to the AIRO scientific commission 2 selected topics dedicated to abstracts presented by first Authors under 40 years old, and almost 20 oral communications are presented in a separate session during the national meeting for young members.

3.2. Links to other national and international societies

One of the main purposes of AIRO Giovani is to build up collaboration programs with other young specialists involved in cancer care. In this sense, strong and constructive relationships have been created with the Italian young medical oncology society members (AIOM), young medical radiology society members (SIRM) as well as with other clinical oncology specialists such as Surgeons, Urologists, and Haematologists. Specifically, since the educational issue became one of the main interests of AIRO Giovani, in June 2011 we had the opportunity to organize a joint meeting with young medical oncologists in Bologna focused on the knowledge exchange between the two fields. During this meeting, synthetic and critical presentations about the main advances in radiation and medical oncology were discussed and 5 clinical cases presented together by a junior radiation/medical oncologist deeply exploring the collaboration between the 2 specialties in everyday clinical life. The success of the first edition, supported by AIRO and AIOM presidents, led to the organization of a second event in 2012. Moreover, the strong commitment of AIRO Giovani to collaborate and exchange knowledge and experiences at an international level led to the integration of the Italian young AIRO group within the European radiation oncology scenario. Particularly, AIRO Giovani members were substantially involved in the activities of the ESTRO working

party on young members. Adjunctively, national and ESTRO representatives were invited to the Italian young annual meeting, with the aim of sensitizing young radiation oncologists to the participation in ESTRO activities and maintain Italian members in a “Junior” network of specialists able to promote the role of radiation therapy worldwide. Finally, AIRO Giovani was directly involved in national meetings that took place in other countries, such as Spain and France.

3.3. Scientific projects

As networking and other activities were growing, AIRO Giovani started 4 collaborative research projects at a national level: the INTER-ROMA Project (2009), the BUONGIORNO Project (2010), the PROCAINA Project (2010) and the STYRO Project (2011). The INTER-ROMA Project (INTERview for Radiation Oncologists on Metastasis Approach), completed in 2009, was a survey on the clinical approach of Radiation Oncologists toward the treatment of bone metastases.⁸ This questionnaire-based study (with a sample size of 122) presented 4 clinical cases with osseous metastatic spread and highlighted considerable differences among radiation oncologists in terms of radiation doses, volumes, field arrangement and supportive therapy, calling for standardized national guidelines to provide uniform evidence-based palliative radiotherapy throughout the country. The BUONGIORNO Project (BUrn Out Nei Giovani Oncologi Radioterapisti Negli Ospedali), is an observational study on the incidence of burn-out syndrome among young radiation oncologists in Italy (the data are under a final analysis). The PROCAINA Project (1 and 2) consists of 2 surveys on the prescribing attitudes of Italian radiation oncologists in 2 clinical presentations of prostate cancer (at diagnosis and postoperative setting).^{9,10}

The most recent project, the STYRO study (survey on training of young radiation oncologists in Italy) is a survey among young members on their ongoing or recently completed residency program, focused on the quality of training, educational needs and expectations for the future. Preliminary data of this study were presented at the 2011 AIRO National Meeting in Genoa and a robust statistical analysis is currently ongoing. We hope this study will be useful in order to better understand the educational needs of young Radiation Oncologists and to compare different educational systems (prior experiences were carried out by other European young RO groups).

3.4. Future perspectives

Future projects of AIRO Giovani include the participation to a newly established interdisciplinary group with urologists and medical oncologists, the organization of national and international educational activities dedicated to junior members and an increasingly important participation to ESTRO activities.

4. Conclusions

In summary, considering its beginning in 2007, AIRO Giovani is still in its infancy. Nevertheless, in these early years

several scientific projects and educational activities have been carried out, with continuously increasing interest and active participation.

The recognition of young members' strategic importance in the clinical discipline of radiation oncology, and in the development of national and international societies, will push AIRO Giovani in the continuous effort to prioritise young specialists participation, involvement and commitment into education, research and clinical care. We believe that the “young members” group in a medical scientific society could help in defining priorities, in contributing to exchange of experiences, in giving members a more personalized service and the opportunity of being part of a national network with international links, projected into the future and with a “natural” inclination towards a multidisciplinary approach.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

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