

Recap of the 2017 SNO Wilkins-Barrick International Outreach Course held in Marrakech, Morocco

Recap submitted by Eric Bouffet

On April 8th, 2017, immediately after the 2017 SIOP Africa meeting, the 2017 Wilkins-Barrick SNO International Outreach Course took place in Marrakech, Morocco. Due to this particular sequence of events, the course chose to focus predominantly, if not exclusively, on paediatric brain tumours. Its main objective was to identify and address the most prominent challenges that impact access to and quality of care in constrained resources settings. With 9 keynote speakers, of which 6 were from North America and 3 from Africa, the program proved to be quite dense, as the entire course was delivered in one day. Yet, attendance was very high, comprising over 150 delegates, all in excellent spirit.

As reiterated by various speakers, constrained resources primarily mean that the development of neuro-oncology programs in Africa cannot follow Western blueprints. However, a number of topics can be addressed in a transcendental manner, such as the delay in diagnosis (a current hot topic). The UK-based HeadSmart program was presented as a successful example, to be possibly duplicated on the African continent, in spite of the extensively discussed context of limited health care resources. Regarding management, the issue of multidisciplinary care was addressed, as many teams still work in silo with little or no communication with other disciplines. As a consequence, many patients suffer from major management-related delays with significant impact on outcome.

Concerning management, the workshop was an opportunity to discuss the importance of the extent of surgery in specific tumor types. As in many other places with limited expertise in paediatric neuro-oncology and constrained technical facilities, the surgical management, in Africa, of patients with tumors such as medulloblastoma or ependymoma is often limited to a generous biopsy. This situation is changing in some countries, as illustrated by Dr. El Abbadi with her presentation on the surgical management of pediatric ependymoma in Morocco.

The use of radiotherapy in the management of pediatric brain tumors was also discussed, as was the issue of radiosurgery and its increasingly high usage for paediatric brain tumours in some institutions. It was in this context that Jeanette Parkes pointed out the lack of data supporting the use of radiosurgery in children.

One of the highlights of the course was the session on the genetics of pediatric brain tumors, led by Uri Tabori, who elaborated on the possibility to screen, detect and treat paediatric brain tumours at an earlier stage (and consequently with improved outcome) in some populations with cancer predisposition syndromes. The course was also an opportunity to discuss the need to collaborate and try to close the “neuro-oncology gap” between high-income and low-income countries. It is clear that topics such as whole-genome sequencing, personalized medicine, checkpoint inhibition, or proton radiation have no place in countries with limited resources.

The role of the 2017 Wilkins-Barrick SNO International Outreach Course was therefore a unique opportunity to address these challenges: although there is no clear solution today on how we might close a widening gap between high and low income countries, awareness of the issue is important, and several contacts were made during this course, in particular between keynote speakers and participants eager to develop some form of collaboration.

