

**Interview with Dirk Verellen,
Candidate for the ESTRO Presidential Election 2024**

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1. Could you tell us about your current and past involvement in ESTRO? What made you become involved in the first place?

My journey as active member began in 2005 with an invitation to chair the pre-meeting IGRT workshop, which immediately evolved into a full course due to its success. During that time, I was also active in AAPM (e.g. TG101 on SBRT), however, as my involvement with ESTRO increased, I knew I found my place. What sets ESTRO apart is its embodiment of the team involved in radiation oncology. This collaborative approach is unique, and something we should wholeheartedly embrace and safeguard. Moreover, ESTRO transcends mere professional networking; it has woven a tapestry of relationships that extend beyond the confines of work. Many of the colleagues I've had the pleasure of meeting through ESTRO have become close friends, turning it into a second family.

2. What is your vision of how Radiation Oncology will look in 2030? How does ESTRO's vision and strategy resonate with your perspective of the future?

Predicting the future is risky (great minds have failed), but it's certain that RO as a non-invasive outpatient treatment modality will remain a cornerstone in the changing landscape of cancer care. When we revisited the ESTRO mission, the word "together" was central: together with patients and industry, together as team and together with the other medical disciplines, creating optimal health for every patient. The last point is crucial: Every European patient deserves access to state-of-the-art treatment.

3. What do you perceive as the most pressing issues or challenges for ESTRO as a scientific society today?

As the world around us changes, cancer care and RO will adapt and evolve. I'm confident ESTRO will follow suit, the rapid embrace of AI being a case in point. However, the real

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challenge lies in establishing ESTRO as the true representative for RO in Europe. While this year's nearly 10,000 members is a new record, it's just a fraction of the total RO professionals in Europe. To effectively advocate for our field and influence policy and cancer care, we need to be more ambitious and aspire matching the numbers of societies like ESMO and ESR. Furthermore, proper education in the different aspects of RO is still lacking across Europe. ESTRO has the potential to become the primary source of knowledge and a central hub for education and training within the EU. We should promote sustained membership commitment, ensuring that ESTRO provides the services members expect. This involves implementing more efficient communication tools among members and establishing a robust framework for lifelong education and professional growth.

4. If you are elected ESTRO President, what will be your goal(s) and/or priorities for your term? What are the potential barriers and how could you overcome them?

As a society, we've experienced organic growth, relying on enthusiasm and voluntary efforts of our members, which was great whilst it was manageable. However, we've reached a tipping point where implementing a professional governance structure is inevitable. This structure must strike a balance, preserving the sense of belonging. The challenge lies in creating a governance framework that encourages collaboration and networking without burdening members with excessive administrative bureaucracy. We also fail somehow to foster members who are eager to contribute but unsure how to "get in". Networking initiatives such as the focus groups and workshops are created to open those doors.

5. How do you envision the interdisciplinary aspect of our Society? And how do you envision the multidisciplinary aspect of the oncology field and how ESTRO could best position itself in this regard?

Interdisciplinary collaboration being in the genetic code of ESTRO, has been mentioned already several times and I see this reflected in my own team in Antwerp. I feel proud and privileged to be a part of this harmonious ensemble where every member plays a vital role in creating what we call "warm health care". As previously mentioned, RO is a cornerstone of cancer treatment. Rather than engaging in internal debates about superior technologies or particles, we should position ourselves as a medical discipline, and less as a technology-driven specialty (preventing the perception of RO being some kind of interventional radiology). Merging medical expertise with new insights in physics and biology is the core of our discipline, the synergistic combination with different disciplines in oncology will be the key for making a real difference for our patients.

6. In your opinion, is ESTRO doing enough to improve patient's outcomes?

My activities in multidisciplinary working groups such as the College of Medicine, the Supreme Health Council and notably the board of directors of the Flemish Cancer Society "Stand Up to Cancer" (with a strong focus on the patient's perspective in cancer research), have shaped my mindset to appreciate the importance of multidisciplinary. ESTRO

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needs to reach out beyond the borders of our own discipline and become a driving force for guideline development, fostering partnerships and collaboration with other societies.

7. Why should ESTRO members vote for you as next President? Why did you decide to run for this position?

Being the longest-serving treasurer of the Society, I had already set my mind to stepping back from governance for a while. The pandemic presented challenges, and given the importance of stability, I agreed to continue serving as treasurer until we weathered the storm. However, although the Society has regained its health, it's evident that we can't simply continue as is. We've outgrown being a casual group of enthusiasts and volunteers; restructuring is necessary. The implementation of a new governance structure, initiated last year by Anna Kirby, Ben Slotman and Matthias Guckenberger, is pivotal for what we can term strategic growth and for safeguarding our future as a strong and healthy society capable of meeting our members' needs. This is a long-term strategy that I fully support and that requires a continuity. An additional driver behind accepting this candidacy, is that it highlights ESTRO's interdisciplinary nature. As the first candidate who isn't a radiation oncologist, being in the running illustrates our society's inclusivity. Regardless of the election outcome, this is a strong message to our members.

8. On a lighter note, what do you like to do for fun?

I enjoy a good book once in a while, but as mentioned in my bio, my passion lies in my work - both a blessing and a curse, as it were. So, with the help of Chris (my life partner) I try to maintain a healthy balance between profession and personal life, ensuring I spend quality time with family and friends. The adage "mens sana in corpore sano" works for me, and morning runs help me to maintain some mental resilience (I fool myself by saying rock climbing too, but lately I'm happy if I can do some indoor bouldering) and ... oh yes, cooking in the weekends, singing along to loud music (much to the agony of my family).