



BRACHYTHERAPY

Interview with Vratislav Strnad, chair-elect of the Committee of the Groupe Européen de Curiethérapie-European Society for Radiotherapy and Oncology (GEC-ESTRO)

Congratulations on winning the election. How do you feel?

I am very pleased to be elected by a majority of the GEC-ESTRO members. It is for me a great honour, a vote of confidence, and as a consequence it is a stimulus to me to commit to do my best.

Are you ready to take on the task of chair-elect?

Naturally, I am ready. I have performed brachytherapy for decades in a whole spectrum of indications. I am familiar with the use of low dose rate (LDR), pulsed dose rate (PDR) and high dose rate (HDR) brachytherapy with iridium-192, iodine-125, ruthenium-106, strontium-90 and, with neutron brachytherapy, with californium-252. Thus I am confident that I can understand the needs and challenges of our members, as well as the challenges of the job in GEC-ESTRO working groups and in ESTRO and brachytherapy generally. As the longstanding chair of the Brachytherapy Group of the German Society of Radiation Oncology (DEGRO) and of the Breast Cancer Working Group of GEC-ESTRO, as well as a member of the GEC-ESTRO committee, a member of the editorial board of the Journal of Brachytherapy and the Journal of Contemporary Brachytherapy, it has been for me always a great pleasure and an honour to work with plenty of outstanding colleagues throughout the world. I am sure that in future I will also have the pleasure of the friendship of all these people.

What has been your involvement in ESTRO, and particularly GEC-ESTRO?

Since 2000, I have actively participated in the GEC-ESTRO Head & Neck Working Group and in the Breast Working Group. In both groups first I spent many years as secretary, then later as chair of the Breast Working Group. One of the great achievements of the GEC-ESTRO Head & Neck Working Group, which we developed together with Jean-Jacque Mazon (president of the French Society for Radiation Oncology and Professor of the Department of Radiation Oncology, Groupe Hospitalier Pitié-Salpêtrière and the University of Paris, France), was a modern guideline for head & neck brachytherapy. In the breast group we succeeded in a bigger deal: together with Csaba Polgár (director-general of the National Institute of Oncology, Budapest, Hungary) and friends from the whole of Europe, we designed and successfully performed a Phase 3 trial that compared partial breast irradiation using multicatheter brachytherapy and whole breast irradiation using external beam radiation therapy. We released the long-term results in 2016 in The Lancet, in consequence of which we published a whole series of detailed guidelines for breast brachytherapy in the Green Journal. Last but not least, I am a member of the teaching faculty of the ESTRO breast course that is chaired by Philip Poortmans (past president of ESTRO, president of the European Cancer Organisation and head of the Department of Radiation Oncology at the Institut Curie, Paris, France).

What do you enjoy most about your activities in GEC-ESTRO?

The biggest advantage of GEC-ESTRO is that our community is not too large, and thus we are able during our meetings to meet nearly everyone and to discuss challenges and ideas in an unfettered way. I enjoy the great debates in our working groups and during our congresses and time after time, I am impressed by the meticulous knowledge of the disputants.

How do you cope with balancing your undertakings in your department, GEC-ESTRO and of course your family?

For me it's "family first"! My great fortune is that my wife, who is also a very busy physician, and my three kids show understanding of my GEC-ESTRO activities. Without their endorsement, I couldn't have put myself forward as a candidate for this duty. Similarly,

it will be a challenge to balance my function as chair of a large brachytherapy division of a university hospital and my GEC-ESTRO activities. My daily clinical practice and the needs of my patients must be my professional priority. But I am also fortunate that all my colleagues support me and understand the challenges.

Do you see any challenges for GEC-ESTRO in the future?

Undoubtedly, we at GEC-ESTRO have a lot of challenges, but one challenge is in first place: we are faced with the fact that brachytherapy, a standard of care and the best therapy for a number of cancer indications, is underutilised and underfunded, increasingly marginalised and in decline across most of Europe. We as physicians repeatedly find that patients who might significantly benefit from brachytherapy are never offered it as an option! This ignorance is even a death warrant for some patients, for instance in the case of cervical cancer! In my view, at least three topics should be discussed in the immediate future:

1. challenges in the brachytherapy education of the next generation of radiation oncologists;
2. the need to rebrand the image of brachytherapy; and
3. adequate reimbursement for brachytherapy.

And you personally, do you foresee any challenges that could arise in your term as chair?

Fortunately we can't foresee our future! Alongside the big challenge outlined above, I expect challenge as we incorporate significantly more our friends from countries east of Germany and Austria into GEC-ESTRO, which is imperative. In this aspect, we definitely have an imbalance in GEC-ESTRO. My opinion is that we as GEC-ESTRO would do better to go to eastern and south eastern Europe, than to go to Asia.

Are there any particular areas in GEC-ESTRO you would like to address?

First, I would like to direct my influence in this position to the immense challenge of "education & image & reimbursement" together with "go to East and Southeast Europe". To master such challenges we need to intensify tight cooperation between GEC-ESTRO and other societies such as the American Brachytherapy Society and self-evidently such tight cooperation is essential and indispensable as well with industry partners.



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About Vratislav Strnad

Vratislav Strnad started his medical career in the late 1980s at the Research Institute for Clinical and Experimental Oncology in Brno, Czech Republic. He focused on neutron-brachytherapy using californium-252. In 1991, he joined the Department of Radiation Oncology at University Hospital Erlangen in Germany and completed his education in radiation oncology. There he has been deeply involved in evolving modern techniques of radiation therapy, simultaneous chemotherapy, interventional radiation therapy (brachytherapy) and in a number of clinical trials. In this department he has chaired the division of interventional radiation therapy since 1995. Subsequently Vratislav was appointed as a visiting professor at the Masaryk-University in Brno



(Czech Republic) and a full professor at the University Erlangen-Nuremberg (Germany). He is a principal investigator and co-investigator of numerous Phase 2 and 3 clinical trials. His work in the field of brachytherapy has been honoured with several awards, such as: the Best Oral Presentation Award at the 26th Annual Meeting of the American Brachytherapy Society, 2005; the Scientific Award of the German Society of Senology (36th Annual Meeting of German Society of Senology, 2006); he has won the Judith Stitt Best Abstract Award twice (at the 28th Annual Meeting of the American Brachytherapy Society 2007 and at the World Congress of Brachytherapy 2016); and he has been awarded with the Hermann Strebel Medal to appreciate his enduring and outstanding contribution to the field of brachytherapy (7th Brachytherapy Meeting of DEGRO/ Austrian Society for Radiation Oncology (ÖGRO) /Scientific Association of Swiss Radiation Oncology (SASRO) 2013). He is a member of the editorial board of the Journal of Brachytherapy, and of the Journal of Contemporary Brachytherapy. He is author of more than 130 original publications, author and editor of the textbook Practical textbook of brachytherapy (3rd edition 2014), author and editor of the textbook Partial Breast Irradiation using Multicatheter Brachytherapy (2006), and author or co-author of a further 35 chapters in other books.

Through his career, he has contributed to all aspects of brachytherapy as a mentor for the training of many physicians in radiation oncology, and as a researcher in brachytherapy, particularly in breast cancer, prostate cancer and head and neck cancer, both within his institution and through cooperative group efforts. Outside hospital, Vratislav Strnad is a devoted husband and father of one daughter and two sons.

