



CONFERENCES

Iridium 192 award



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What does this award mean to you?

The Iridium 192 award is the ultimate reward for my efforts in my professional life. It has touched me even more than the lifetime achievement award I was given by the European Society for Radiotherapy and Oncology (ESTRO) in 2018. The funny thing is that this Iridium 192 award was inaugurated when I was committee president (now called chair) of the Groupe Européen de Curiethérapie (GEC)-ESTRO, to honour old but very famous people who had contributed significantly to the development of worldwide brachytherapy. To now be one of the names on that impressive list is very exciting.

To whom would you like to dedicate your award?

In the first place I have to dedicate it to Emmanuel van der Schueren. He was my mentor in Leuven; he was always very critical and pushed me forward. He gave me the chance to go to Paris and put me in contact with so many important people in oncology in Europe and beyond.

But of course, I want to dedicate it also to so many other colleagues in radiation oncology who helped to bring success in our professional field: Alain Gerbault, Richard Poetter, Christine Haie, Christian Kirisits, Jack Venselaar, Jean-Jacques Mazon, Csaba Polgar, György Kovacs, Vratislav Strnad, Jacob Lindegaard, Kari Tanderup, Dimos Baltas, Peter Hoskin and so many other young colleagues who have now taken the lead in working groups and teaching activities.

What have been the highlights of your career?

I have been active in many (sometimes I think too many???) fields of radiation oncology: breast cancer, gynaecological cancers, skin, soft tissue sarcomas, anal cancers, orbital benign and malignant indications, and I was involved in the start-up of breast cancer screening in Leuven and later in Flanders.

I was always extremely focused on achieving optimal patient care; this means on curing patients while causing minimal harm. Radiotherapy offered the possibility to cure while sparing the areas around tumour sites, which to me was very important, for instance in lip and skin cancers on the face, breast cancers and anal canal cancers. As brachytherapy seemed an excellent tool to limit the required dose to the target and to spare significantly more non-target tissue volumes than had been possible before, I completed my radiation oncology training in Leuven by spending an extra year in Paris to master this radiation technique at the Institut Gustave Roussy in Villejuif and Hôpital Henri Mondor, Créteil, France. As I returned as a staff member at Leuven University Hospitals, I was able to introduce modern brachytherapy techniques in Belgium and I used them to treat those patients for whom

it could improve the therapeutic ratio. Its use improved local control and produced better cosmetic (breast, skin and lip) or functional outcomes (anal cancer, oral and oropharyngeal cancers) than other techniques, and it offered cures for inoperable cancers such as advanced cervical cancer. The successes that we obtained for these patients stay in my memory as individual highlights of my professional life.

What are you proudest of in your career?

Without doubt, the development of image-guided adaptive brachytherapy for cervical cancer. This work started in 2002 under the lead of Richard Poetter (Vienna, Austria; high-dose-rate brachytherapy), Christine Haie-Meder (Gustave-Roussy, France; low-dose-rate brachytherapy) and our team in Leuven (pulsed-dose-rate brachytherapy) and resulted in a common radiobiological approach and astonishing improvement (25-30% in local control and 16% in survival) in advanced cervical cancer. Its use has continued to evolve due to worldwide changes in treatment approaches to cervical cancer that have been introduced by the EMBRACE study group.

What has been your involvement within ESTRO?

After I had been trained at the Institut Gustave Roussy in Paris by Daniel Chassagnez and Alain Gerbaulet and had obtained certification in radiobiology at the University of Paris XIII (Kremlin-Bicêtre), I got the opportunity to become a teacher in the GEC-ESTRO teaching course in brachytherapy in Gdansk in 1996. This opened the way to international contacts and extra visibility within ESTRO.

I was elected to the GEC-ESTRO committee and became its president (the last before the post was changed to committee chair to avoid having too many presidents within ESTRO 😊).

In 2000 I was asked to replace Alain Gerbaulet (then at the department of radiotherapy, Institut Gustave Roussy, Paris, France) as course director and I remained in that function for 16 years. Meanwhile I was active in the different working groups that were established within GEC: breast, gynae, endovascular, etc.

