

AICR: Committed to cancer research in prevention and survival

Despite recent advances in cancer research and medicine, there are still many ways that we as individuals can help reduce our own risk and prevent some cancers. **Deirdre McGinley-Gieser**, Senior Vice President at the American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR), believes that the choices we make every day can affect our chances of getting cancer and she spoke with us at *Research Features* to discuss her role and outline changes we can make to our lifestyles.

Cancer is the feared disease that is becoming unavoidable and a constant battle for scientists and researchers worldwide. In 2017, an estimated 1.7 million new cases of cancer will be diagnosed in the United States and more than 600,000 people will die from the disease. Nearly a third of the most common cancers in the United States can be prevented and every individual has the power to reduce his or her cancer risk with the following three guidelines: regular exercise, maintaining a healthy weight and eating a healthy diet.

For over 30 years, AICR has funded research on diet, nutrition and cancer, helping to change our lifestyles and how we think about cancer. Senior Vice President, Deirdre McGinley-Gieser spoke with us at *Research Features* to share AICR's mission and talk about the important AICR-funded research that is helping change lives to save lives.

Hi Deirdre! Can you tell us how AICR differs from other organisations focused on cancer research?

AICR is a unique organisation in that we focus solely on how nutrition, physical activity and weight management relates

to cancer risk for prevention and survival. We fund research in these areas, undertake regular comprehensive reviews of the global research and provide evidence-based recommendations for individuals to reduce their cancer risk. Our work is different from other organisations in the sense that these are lifestyle factors that we, as individuals, have some control over. Our mission is positive, empowering and has benefits for other chronic diseases in addition to cancer.

What does your role involve as Senior Vice-President for Programs and Strategic Planning at AICR?

As Senior Vice President for Programs and Strategic Planning, I am responsible for the day-to-day work across all our program areas – research, education and communications – and for ensuring that these are aligned with our organisational strategy. This work includes: our research grant program, scientific conference, print and online health information for the general public, external presentations and support for our scientific and health professional partners working in this field.

Since it was founded in 1982, what impact has AICR had on the landscape of cancer ▶

The choices we make every day affect our chances of getting cancer



research? What achievements are you personally most proud of?

Back when AICR was founded in 1982, there was very little scientific research being funded in either nutrition or cancer prevention. In fact, the notion that our lifestyle could impact our cancer risk was not taken seriously and AICR led the way in bringing existing knowledge to the attention of the scientific community as well as most importantly, encouraging and funding new cancer research. Since then, the field has flourished; other major cancer organisations have incorporated our prevention research into their mission and work. Indeed, scientific discovery in the prevention of cancer has expanded beyond diet to include physical activity, weight management, dietary patterns and how the role of what we eat and how active we are over our lifetime can reduce cancer risk. There is much more to learn, but AICR's role in championing this area certainly changed the landscape of cancer research from a purely treatment focus to incorporate prevention and survivorship.

I worked on our 1997 Expert Report, which was the first of our reports to synthesise the global evidence on food, nutrition, physical activity and cancer prevention, and to provide updated dietary recommendations. At the time, I was unaware of how groundbreaking this work was – the review process, global scope and dietary recommendations were all unique in the cancer prevention arena. This report provided a critical evidence base for the field in general. For AICR, this report guided our future scientific work and provided new, evidence-based recommendations to support our education programs for the general public.

Which AICR-funded projects are you particularly excited about?

The research projects we fund are vital and build up our scientific knowledge incrementally. However, the projects that I am really excited about and what I consider to be the most important, are the studies being conducted by independent researchers that are testing AICR's Ten Cancer Prevention Recommendations. These scientists are looking at ongoing studies of diet, physical activity and disease risk among large numbers of people and analysing them based on how closely those people follow our Recommendations. Over ten of these studies are now published and the results reinforce that following AICR's Recommendations does reduce cancer risk,



Deirdre McGinley-Gieser,
Senior Vice President
of AICR

Research now shows that what you eat, how you move and how much you weigh can lower your risk for many cancers



improve cancer survivorship and protect individuals against other chronic diseases.

What is the motivation behind the Continuous Update Project and what impact has it had so far?

We invested in publishing our expert reports in 1997 and 2007. These provided critical updates on the state of the scientific evidence and our cancer prevention recommendations. We needed to maintain this evidence base, but the sheer amount and speed of research studies being undertaken worldwide demanded a different process – one that could keep pace with the accumulation of evidence – and this led to the creation of the Continuous Update Project (CUP). We set up one database to house all the scientific evidence, which is now the largest of its kind in the world, developed a robust systematic review process and invited a panel of expert scientists to participate.

Now, the CUP is an ongoing analysis of global research focused on the intersection of diet, weight and physical activity with cancer prevention and survival. The CUP has become a trusted scientific resource used by experts across the United States and worldwide, helping to shape guidelines and policy for cancer prevention. We have also published 14 reports on different cancers and our new recommendations will be published in the upcoming months.

Can you tell me more about the Cancer Prevention, Together We Can initiative?

February is 'Cancer Prevention Month', and this is AICR's opportunity to raise awareness among the general public that some of the most common cancers are preventable. The Cancer Prevention, Together We Can month-long campaign is dedicated to encouraging everyone to share this vital, lifesaving information. It recognises that we do not live in isolation – we cook and share meals together, we work with colleagues, we socialise with family and friends. Every day there is an opportunity to take a step toward reducing cancer risk – some examples may include: bringing fruit to the office instead of sugary foods such as chocolate, taking a 10-minute walk with your work colleague rather than sitting down on your lunch break or preparing a healthy plant-based meal rather than getting fast

food or takeaway. Our campaign website *Can Prevent*, offers the latest science and statistics along with easy to share ideas to get people into action.

What key advice would you give someone who wanted to make changes in their lifestyle to reduce their cancer risk?

Start by making small changes that are not overwhelming and that you are likely to stick with. It might be adding more vegetables and fruits to your daily meals and snacks, or being more active such as taking the stairs rather than the elevator several times a week. Once you have adapted and made these changes habitual, you can include other more specific changes, such as reducing your consumption of processed meat. The key is to make gradual changes that work for you so that you feel empowered by taking steps to reduce your cancer risk.

On our website, you can get all the help you need. You can download a 30-day checklist that outlines one small action per day for a month; you can join our 12-week program, the New American Plate Challenge, that puts our cancer prevention recommendations into practice with support from dietitians; and you can also access lots of our easy healthy recipes and ideas to help you get active.

Outreach and education are a key part of AICR's work. What challenges and rewards does this aspect bring?

The good news is that many more people are looking for health information and are active participants in protecting their well-being. The challenges for us are reaching individuals at the right time and breaking through the noise of other health messages. Today, a lot of unscientific and frankly dangerous advice is only a click away, so part of our challenge is getting our authoritative resources in front of the public as well as having readily available and clear information that meets their needs and programs that support them making changes in their life.

Whether it is using our recipes, losing weight through our New American Plate Challenge, discussing healthier food options with our dietitians or simply

feeling better equipped to talk with an oncologist – it is tremendously rewarding to hear from individuals who benefit from our work at AICR.

And finally, looking to the future, what are AICR's goals over the next five years? In what direction do you hope to take cancer research and prevention?

We have many goals as there is always going to be so much to do. I would say that we primarily want to keep funding innovative science that holds the most hope for cancer prevention and survival. Our understanding of cancer biology has undergone an astonishing transformation over the last 30 years and we fully expect that to allow us to provide more targeted guidance on cancer risk to the public. With the rapidly growing population of cancer survivors, it is critical that we fund studies that will lead to developing specific guidelines and recommendations for survivors of different cancers. Indeed, preventing secondary cancers and mitigating the future health impacts of gruelling treatments will become increasingly important.

In addition to this, we also want the concept of living to reduce your cancer risk to become as universally understood and practised as living to prevent heart disease – among clinicians and the general public.

• If you would like to find out more information about AICR and AICR-funded cancer research, please visit their website at www.aicr.org.

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