

Hadron therapy: between medical need and economic expediency

Professor Wilfried De Neve, U-Gent
Professor Guy Storme, VUB
Professor Walter Van den Bogaert, KUL
Professor Yolande Lievens, KUL
Professor Paul Van Houtte, Bordet / ULB
Professor Pierre Scalliet, UCL
Professor Jean-Marie Deneufbourg, ULg
Doctor Didier Vander Steichel, Foundation against Cancer
Mister Paul Jacquet de Haveskercke, Foundation against Cancer

The time is ripe for a hadron therapy centre (protons / ions) to be established in Belgium.

On the one hand, the medical advantages of this new type of radiation are well documented and there is a consensus of opinion on the patients most likely to benefit from it.

Furthermore, from a technical point of view and thanks to cooperation with the various centres in Europe (Germany, Italy, Austria, etc.) and throughout the world (USA, Japan), the conditions are now right for a similar initiative in Belgium.

In another instance of cooperation no less remarkable, all of the radiotherapy departments at Belgian universities support this project and are prepared to become involved.

All that remains is to find the political will and the necessary funding ...

Belgian patients will then be able to benefit from treatment which does not carry an exorbitant price tag compared with other medical techniques commonly used and reimbursed by the social security system.

Definite medical benefits

For a thousand patients in Belgium every year, hadron therapy offers the guarantee of more effective treatment and a greater chance of a cure or a smaller risk of after-effects.

These include around one hundred children, for whom proton therapy radiation is currently the best way of combining therapeutic effectiveness and minimum after effects in the long term.

Our political decision-makers will be unable to ignore this reality for long, as patients call for hadron therapy with increasing urgency as soon as they are informed of the benefits they can expect.

Added to this is the enormous sympathy felt for children with cancer in Belgium...

Towards “two-streams” radiotherapy

For these thousand Belgian patients a year, there is not, nor will there be in the short and medium term, sufficient capacity in centres abroad to receive them.

These centres barely have enough capacity to treat their own citizens - a situation that is set to continue - and unless an adequate number of properly distributed centres are set up, we will see the development of “two-streams” radiotherapy in Europe.

Furthermore, there is another possible risk – that of the appearance of purely commercial treatment centres reserved for affluent patients.

However, if the supply in terms of hadron therapy is correctly organised, this will rule out any risk of inflation or of medical over-consumption.

In fact, the limited reception capacity per centre makes it necessary to select patients on the basis of strict medical indications.

The Foundation’s action

Of course, collecting a seed capital of EUR 100 million is way beyond the capability of the Foundation against Cancer.

However, it was the catalyst behind the project, making it possible to gather together skills and goodwill around a joint goal.

The Foundation's ultimate aim in all of its actions is to give the greatest possible benefit to all patients suffering from cancer.

We are therefore supporting and will continue to support the creation of a hadron therapy centre in Belgium, through initiative-driven lobbying as well as concrete action.

The Foundation against Cancer is prepared, in the context of its social initiatives in favour of patients, to contribute towards the travel and accommodation expenses of those few Belgian patients who will have the good fortune and the privilege to be accepted at a hadron therapy centre in Europe, as they cannot have such a centre in their own country.

We are also prepared to invest in training the nursing staff called upon to work in the future Belgian proton /ion therapy centre.

And the term 'invest' is used advisedly.

In fact, building a high-technology centre in Belgium and funding the scientific staff needed to run it involves an investment which has significant positive consequences in medical, human, but also economic terms.

A real economic challenge

Hadron therapy has reached a watershed: it is currently moving from the experimental stage to the industrial stage.

Estimates indicate that one treatment centre per 8 million inhabitants will be required.

This adds up to almost 50 centres in Europe.

At € 100 million per unit, this means an economic and scientific development project of around five billion euros over the next twenty or thirty years, not counting the needs outside Europe, which may be estimated at around the same again.

Given this situation, there are two possible attitudes:

The first involves splitting hairs, claiming that we don't have the money to set up a hadron therapy centre, that the country is too small for it, the location isn't right - in short a thousand and one reasons for burying the project.

The second attitude is that which Belgium adopted fifty years ago when, on 8 April 1951, it was one of the founding members of the European Coal and Steel Community, or that taken in 1970 by a number of French and German businesses, subsequently joined by Spanish and English companies, when the Airbus consortium was established.

Let us quote Airbus here: *"as it became clear that only by co-operating would European aircraft manufacturers be able to compete effectively with the U.S. giants. By overcoming national divides, sharing development costs, collaborating in the interests of a greater market share, and even agreeing a common set of measurements and a common language, Airbus changed the face of the business, and brought airlines, passengers and crews the benefits of real competition"*.

Today, Airbus has become the reference in the aeronautics industry and builds the largest aircraft in the world ...

There is one final, but nonetheless important point: the research and technical development linked to hadron therapy cannot be left exclusively in the hands of a small number of private players.

Let Belgium join in with the big guys!

We are launching an urgent call for the creation of a mixed European public/private consortium to position and carry out our project, not only in Belgium, but in Europe and throughout the world.

Hadron therapy is not a myth, or a dream. However, it is up to us, doctors, scientists, technicians, political decision-makers and economic players, to make it a reality.

Let the 'big guys' come forward!