

Health Services Research in Oncology and Cancer Care funding programme: A look back at the first call for proposals

In the context of the National Strategy Against Cancer 2014–2017, the Swiss Cancer Research foundation started the funding programme Health Services Research in Oncology and Cancer Care in 2016. The purpose of the programme is to expand and strengthen research activities throughout Switzerland in the area of health services in oncology. There was a good response to the first call for proposals 2016/17, and of the 44 research proposals submitted, the Swiss Cancer Research foundation was able to fund seven research projects.

Health services research is a research area that spans various disciplines, including medicine, epidemiology, economics, sociology, and ethics. It examines how people are supplied with health-related products and services under everyday conditions. The focus of the research is mainly on the quality, benefits, and costs of health services. The findings are meant to aid creation of fair access to services and in this way to promote the health and personal well-being of individuals and the entire population.

Considering the significance of the findings for medical progress, health services research is no less important than clinical research and basic research. But in contrast to clinical research and basic research, in

which Switzerland is already a worldwide leader, health services research is currently less well developed. When defining the projects for the action field "Promotion of research", the National Strategy Against Cancer 2014–2017 therefore focused on health services research.

The Swiss Academy of Medical Sciences (SAMS) was a pioneer in promoting health services research, when in 2012 it created a five-year funding programme to strengthen health services research. In 2015, the programme was complemented by the National Research Programme 74 "Smarter Health Care" funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). Building on this groundwork by the SAMS and the SNSF, the Swiss Cancer Research foundation (SCR) launched a funding programme for cancer-specific health services research in 2016 to strengthen health services research specifically in the area of oncology.

The funding programme, named Health Services Research in Oncology and Cancer Care, has a planned duration of five years and is supported financially in equal parts by the SCR and the Accentus Foundation (Marlies-Engeler-Fonds), which supports social, cultural, scientific, and other not-for-profit projects worldwide. Each year, a call for proposals is issued, and support is granted to up to four large research projects (with up to 250000 francs) and several smaller projects such as literature research or pilot studies (with up to 75000 francs). The funding total each year is approximately one million francs.

The Health Services Research in Oncology and Cancer Care funding programme issued the first call for proposals in the summer of 2016. By the submission deadline, 44 proposals had been received (for 21 small and 23 large research projects). The proposals were submitted predominantly by researchers who work at hospitals (20) and universities or universities of applied sciences (17) but also by patient organizations (3), cancer registries (2), and health insurance companies (2). Two thirds of the proposals came from Zurich (16), Geneva (8), and Bern (6). The total funding requested by the 44 proposals was 6 540 242 francs.

For evaluation of the research proposals, an 11-member scientific committee of experts in Germany and Switzerland was established; the experts covered various subject areas within health services research (Table 6). The committee was chaired by Marcel Zwahlen at the Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine (ISPM) at the University of Bern. The committee selected the research projects for funding based on a two-stage evaluation procedure: The committee members decided on an initial selection of research projects based on the project outlines submitted and then evaluated full proposals for those selected projects.

In the first evaluation stage, each project outline was examined by two members of the committee. They checked whether a project was in fact a health services research project and whether it was cancer-related. If so, they then rated the project outline based on four different criteria:

- 1) significance of the research project in terms of improving oncological health services,
- 2) scientific quality and appropriateness of the chosen research methods,
- 3) feasibility of the research project,
- 4) the applicant's previous scientific achievements.

Of the 44 research projects submitted, the committee members rated 35 as relevant health services research projects. Thematically, the projects covered the entire patient's pathway (Figure 2) and all areas of health services research, including quality, demand and utilization, economic aspects of health services provision, and use of new technologies.

At the end of the first evaluation stage, the committee invited a short list of eleven applicants (five small and six large research projects) to submit full proposals. In the second evaluation stage, the full proposals were evaluated, based on the same criteria as in the first evaluation stage, by three members of the committee and in addition by at least two national and international experts. In the end, the committee recommended seven out of eleven research projects for funding. At a board meeting on 7 April 2017, and in accordance with the committee's recommendations, the board of the Swiss Cancer Research foundation approved the first seven research projects for the funding programme with a total funding amount of 941 950 francs.

The researchers responsible for the seven approved projects plan to conduct their research in the next one to four years. In addition to research questions on

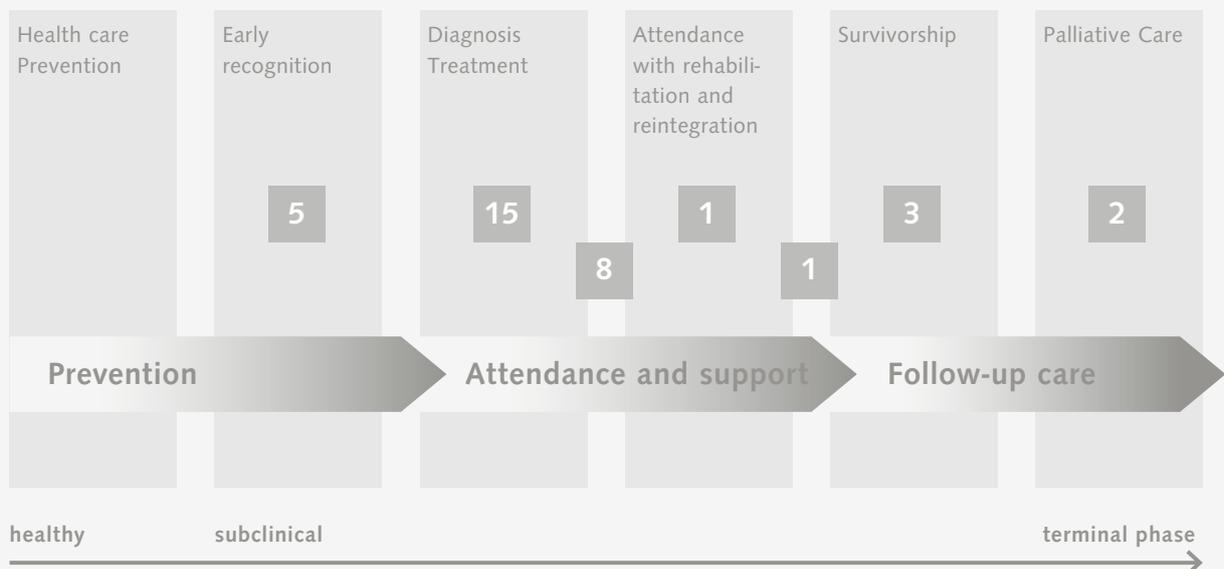
Table 6

Members of the scientific committee for the funding programme's first call for proposals

| Name | University/institute/organization |
|---|--|
| Prof. Marcel Zwahlen, PhD (president) | Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine (ISPM), University of Bern |
| PD Eva Bergsträsser, MD | Paediatric Palliative Care, University Children's Hospital Zurich |
| Prof. Iren Bischofberger, PhD | Department of Health Science, Kalaidos University of Applied Sciences, Zurich |
| Prof. Urs Brügger, PhD | ZHAW School of Management and Law, Winterthur |
| Prof. Steffen Eychmüller, MD | University Center for Palliative Care, Inselspital Bern |
| Klazien Matter-Walstra, PhD | European Center for Pharmaceutical Medicine, University of Basel |
| Prof. Thomas Perneger, MD | Service qualité des soins, Hôpitaux universitaires de Genève (HUG) |
| Prof. Isabelle Peytremann-Bridevaux, MD | Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine (IUMSP), University of Lausanne (UNIL) |
| Prof. Thomas Rosemann, MD, PhD | Institute of General Practice, University Hospital Zurich |
| PD Thomas Ruhstaller, MD | Breast Center, St.Gallen Cantonal Hospital |
| Prof. Susanne Singer, MD | Institute of Medical Biometry, Epidemiology and Informatics, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz |

Figure 2

Thematic distribution of the submitted research projects over the patient's pathway, which have been classified as health services research (35 out of 44 projects).



continuity of cancer care in different regions of Switzerland and on unequal access to mammography screening programmes, the research projects will also study the quality of care for young women with breast cancer and the secure use of information technologies in the management of patient data. Other research topics being investigated in the first year of the funding programme are: improving treatment through optimization of medication use, the efficacy and safety of treatments with elderly patients following treatment guidelines, and the need for psychosocial follow-up care after cancer in childhood.

Upon completion of the first call for proposals, and based on a survey of the committee members, it was decided that the funding programme will be continued in the same form in the following years. The only change will be some modifications in the make-up of the scientific committee for better coverage of some underrepresented areas within health services research in the future.

With the establishment of the Health Services Research in Oncology and Cancer Care funding programme, project number 6.1 of the National Cancer Strategy 2014–2017, namely, “health services research”, is deemed completed. The results of the funded research projects are to be followed up on and analysed. The aim is to identify as early as possible any findings that are relevant for health policy and to communicate them to decision makers in government and the health care system.



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After studying biotechnology at Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus-Senftenberg and Technische Universität Dresden, Janich completed a PhD at the Centre for Genomic Regulation in Barcelona. She then worked as a researcher at the University of Lausanne before joining the Swiss Cancer League in February 2016.

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