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New cancer computing co-operation will aid research into future treatments

Plans to co-ordinate the use of cancer research computers across the UK will create a huge new database to help researchers looking for cancer treatments, scientists say today (August 1).

The aim is to oversee the development of cancer research databases held by different research organisations across the country, ensuring they speak the same “language” and use the same formats to help share results in the UK and with cancer researchers throughout the world.

The Cancer Bioinformatics Co-ordination Unit has been set up under the auspices of the National Cancer Research Institute (NCRI). The NCRI was set up last year to co-ordinate cancer research between charities, industry and Government bodies.

The NCRI currently has 15 member organisations, including Cancer Research UK and other large cancer research charities, the Medical Research Council and the UK Departments of Health.

The Bioinformatics Co-ordination Unit will work with not only the constituent members of the NCRI but all centres involved in cancer research - at universities, Government-funded centres, charities, and the pharmaceutical industry.

The plan has the support of the MRC, Cancer Research UK, DoH, the Institute of Cancer Research (based in London) and Astra Zeneca who have all agreed to provide financial support. It is envisaged the unit will have two to three full time staff.

The move is being seen as timely because of the growing number of independent cancer databases springing up. These range from major projects such as the Cancer Genome Project, at the Sanger Centre, Cambridge, through local university initiatives to the national “E-Science” programme.

Specific tasks for the co-ordination unit will be:

- developing a national strategy for the development of cancer bio-informatics.
- mapping-out ongoing activities, nationally and internationally.
- reaching agreement on key vocabularies used in various areas (ontologies).
- reaching consensus on common data elements and data recording strategies in key areas.
- liaising with international partners.

Some of the issues to be tackled are general to all types of electronic databases, and are already being addressed in areas such as genomic data; micro-array data; and proteomic data. Others are specific to cancer, for instance cytogenetics data; histopathology data; therapeutic data, clinical trial data, and may require new vocabularies (ontologies) to be developed.

Dr Liam O'Toole, Director of the NCRI, explained that the Co-ordination Unit would ensure the development of a national approach to cancer bio-informatics rather than watching piecemeal initiatives spring up in an ad hoc fashion.

“The NCRI Cancer Bio-informatics Co-ordination Unit will provide the resources that the research community needs to co-ordinate its efforts nationally and internationally.

“Bio-informatics is essential for the management of data in modern biology and medical research. We have a unique opportunity here to develop cancer bio-informatics in this country so that the results of UK cancer research have maximum impact in the fight against cancer.”

One important area where the co-ordination unit will play a key role is in liaison with the US National Cancer Institute, which has already embarked on such a project in America. It is seen as vital that the US and UK databases share a similar format so that data can be easily searched and swapped.

Dr Ken Buetow, Director of the NCI Center for Bio-informatics, said :“We welcome this NCRI initiative. The NCI looks forward to working with the UK cancer research community to establish a shared vocabulary and the use of internationally agreed standards for data collection.”

Dr Richard Wooster, a recognised expert in this area, has agreed to oversee the work of the Unit. Dr Wooster will chair a National Advisory Panel that will provide advice to the NCRI member organisations and act as a focus for international liaison. Dr Wooster works on the Cancer Genome Project at the Sanger Centre, Cambridge.

ENDS

Notes to Editors

The National Cancer Research Institute (NCRI) was set up in April 2001. It is a partnership between Government, the voluntary sector and the private sector, with the purpose of streamlining and accelerating the advancement of cancer research in the UK.

A key role of the NCRI is to provide a continually updated database of all the cancer research being undertaken in the UK. A wider aim is to draw up a new, more focused, cancer research agenda, encouraging work in neglected areas but also acting as a general resource and authoritative voice for cancer research. The NCRI aims to do this by developing an overall strategy for cancer research in the UK and co-ordinating activities between member organisations.

The NCRI consists of the main funding bodies for cancer research in the UK:

- the main Government cancer research funders: the Medical Research Council, and the Health Departments of England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council.
- the main cancer research charities: Cancer Research UK, Ludwig Institute; Marie Curie Institute; Tenovus; Breakthrough Breast Cancer; Association for International Cancer Research; Yorkshire Cancer Research, and Macmillan Cancer Relief.
- the pharmaceutical industry involved in cancer research.

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