



# CR

Collaborations → Results

By Kevin Begos

## Cancer in the Middle East

**This spring, CR correspondent Kevin Begos travels to the Middle East to report on the medical and cultural challenges of cancer care in the region. His first stop: a gathering of cancer researchers on the shores of the Dead Sea.**

By Kevin Begos

SWEIMEH, Jordan – Civilizations have flourished in the area around the Dead Sea for thousands of years, but this March brought something new. The American Association for Cancer Research (AACR) held its first-ever conference in the Middle East, just outside Amman, Jordan.


With attendees from nearly 40 countries, the conference included hundreds of researchers, including Egyptians, Iranians, Lebanese, Palestinians and Saudi Arabians. Conference chairman **Samir N. Khleif** says the event marks the first time that top scientists from all over the world have come to the Middle East for a conference focusing on basic research, which has traditionally received little attention in the region.

"This is why AACR had broken through this glass ceiling, or taboo, into this region," says Khleif, who is head of the cancer vaccine section at the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Md. "I think the issue here is the lack of the critical mass of centers of excellence. The majority of the universities [in the Middle East] do not have centers of excellence of research. They have PhDs, and they have faculty, but they don't conduct a tremendous amount of research."

One barrier to creating Middle East research institutions has been the lack of face-to-face discussions with scientists from the rest of the world, Khleif says. Scientific publications are available via the internet, but that by itself isn't enough for world-class research. "Creating those kind of bridges, and those kind of channels, between good scientists ... would really help a lot."

Abdul Khalid Siraj, a hematology-oncology researcher at King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Centre in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, agrees that the conference addresses a crucial need in the region.

"It is very important just to establish this kind of network, and bring the awareness to the people of how important the research is. Because ... in the Third World countries, or the developing countries, the concept of research is not really clear," Siraj says. "This kind of meeting plays an important role. It helps us to share the data—which is very much different within our community and the West—and get the expert advice regarding these matters."

Margaret Foti, the AACR's chief executive officer, was part of a delegation that met with Jordan's King Abdullah II. In remarks to conference attendees, Foti said that the AACR was "very, very moved" by the king's interest. 

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**Look to future issues of CR and to [www.CRmagazine.org](http://www.CRmagazine.org) for more of Kevin Begos' stories and podcasts about issues facing cancer patients, their families and their doctors in the Middle East.**

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