

Translation of the Press Release of the Walloon Government in Belgium

Friday 2nd May 2014

€47 million for the first Proton Therapy Center. A Walloon center dedicated to research and the treatment of cancer in Belgium

At the instigation of the Ministers for the Economy and Higher Education, Jean-Claude Marcourt, and for Research, Jean-Marc Nollet, the Walloon government agreed to finance a €47 million proton therapy project on Thursday April 24.

This financing will enable the creation of an excellence center in Charleroi, whose purpose is to widen the scope of proton therapy applications, in addition to unique treatment applications, through a new research and development program conducted by the Universities of Brussels, Liège, Mons and Charleroi.

Thanks to the advanced technologies provided by the Walloon company IBA, this new center will be dedicated to research and development on new radiotherapy techniques in order to widen the scope of proton therapy applications. The center is expected to be operational in 2017.

Proton therapy today offers valuable advantages. By delivering a precise dose to the tumors, it allows maximum efficacy whilst at the same time minimizing the radiation dose in healthy tissue surrounding the tumor. By sparing healthy tissue, this alternative radiotherapy method reduces the risk of undesirable side effects and secondary cancers.

Beyond the treatment performance, the Walloon proton therapy platform will become a unique tool for research in Europe and even worldwide. The project is consistent with the Biowin and Mecatech competitive clusters developed in the framework of the Second Marshall Plan for Green Development.

Four universities, the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), the Université de Liège (ULg), the Université de Mons (UMons) and the Université de Namur (UNamur) have already drawn up a top-level multidisciplinary research program.

The purpose of these studies is to determine which medical cases could benefit from proton therapy. Many research teams have already developed programs to analyze the question. In addition, these studies will aim at improving treatment planning and side effects assessment (through the use of radiopharmaceuticals). They will also enable to develop dynamic tools designed to adapt the patient care during the treatment thanks to real time data's that show how the tumor is evolving.

The planned research will focus on:

- Technological aspects: to precisely determine how proton doses may be delivered within the tissues in order to improve the treatment efficiency and reduce any residual risks. In addition, the beam will be tested in various technological studies covering subjects such as materials and their resistance to irradiation;
- Fundamental biology studies concerning tissue response to irradiation. This study has never been conducted yet but it is essential to study the proton therapy efficiency in more detail to improve its effectiveness.
- Clinical studies in order to test highly innovative approaches on a small scale in a cutting-edge environment and based upon a strictly supervised methodology.

The Proton therapy Center will be strategically located in Charleroi, on the campus of the "Hôpital Civil Marie Curie" - University hospital of Charleroi close to a new 600-bed hospital which should open its doors mid-October 2014. The center will be easily accessible for patients from Wallonia, Brussels, Flanders and France and also for the various different research teams. Building this research center in Charleroi will confirm the town's position as center of excellence in the field of medical research.

“In order to remove artificial barriers, a new dynamic that Wallonia has introduced through competitive clusters and to enhance collaboration between universities, which led to the creation of ARES, I have unified universities and companies around the creation in Wallonia, and more especially in Charleroi, of the first European proton therapy center dedicated to research and to cancer treatment” announced Jean-Claude Marcourt, the Minister of Economy and Higher Education.

“Proton therapy will restore hope to hundreds of patients and in the first place, to children suffering from cancer. The Louvain-la-Neuve based company IBA is the world leader in proton therapy. We have been supporting research into this field for years, and I am especially pleased that this cutting-edge technology can now be used in Wallonia. It offers a new, less invasive and more effective way of fighting tumors. In addition to the therapeutic aspect, the new Proton Therapy Center dedicated to research will enable Wallonia to stay at the leading edge of the research against cancer” underlined Jean-Marc Nollet, the Minister for Research.

The Mayor, Paul Magnette, added *“Charleroi already has a “Biopark” with 800 researchers, biologists, chemists and doctors all working in the biomedical and biotechnological sectors. This Biopark is listed among the ten best European biopharmaceutical clusters as mentioned in a study on this subject. In the Biopark, universities, training and research centers and many companies are already used to working together. The creation of this Proton Therapy Center supported by the Walloon government further strengthens this center of excellence”*.

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