Director’s response to the Epigenetics and Mechanisms (EGM) Branch Review

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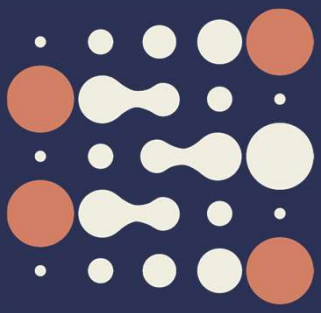
Scientific Council, Sixty-second Session
Lyon 11–13 February 2026



International Agency for Research on Cancer
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The following slides present the Director’s response to the Epigenetics and Mechanisms Branch (EGM) Review, which was conducted remotely in January 2025.

Overall recommendations for EGM - Answer

The RP suggested the following scientific portfolio recommendations for the Secretariat's consideration: *The EGM branch has a unique interdisciplinary function within the IARC ecosystem, most prominently by offering synergising research on the microbiome, epigenome and environmental exposures across a wide range of malignancies. This scientific environment should be safeguarded during upcoming transitions. If the Branch has to cease in its current form, the best way forward is probably to have it stay together as a unit, nested in another branch*.

- **EGM Branch to cease as independent Branch** effective 1 January 2026, in line with **IARC MTS 2021–2025 evaluation report and Review Panel recommendation:** Prioritize strategic goals based on mission, not sustaining Branch structure.
- **EGM research scope too broad:** Includes epigenetic biomarkers of childhood cancer, epigenetic drivers of cancer progression, toxicology & epigenetics, HPV-related cancers → spreads resources thinly.
- **Prioritization exercise (Senior Advisory Team retreat, Sept 2025):** Few EGM projects are mission-critical; budget constraints necessitate focusing on high-priority areas.
- **High-priority research continuing:**
  - ❑ Epigenetic early detection biomarkers of childhood cancers
  - ❑ Molecular studies on infections and cancers (including microbiome studies)
- **Lowest-priority programs phased out:** Epigenetic drivers of cancer progression, Toxicogenomics → 2 positions abolished
- **EGM personnel reassignment based on expertise:**
  - ➔ **ENV Branch:** scientists in epigenetic early detection of childhood cancers
  - ➔ **EPR Branch:** scientists in HPV-related cancers
  - ➔ **Post-docs and lab technicians** follow supervisors; 2 lab technicians reassigned to **NME** and **GEM** Branches

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I have decided that, **effective 1 January 2026, the EGM Branch will cease to exist as an independent Branch**. This strategic, evidence-based decision is fully aligned with the recommendations of the **IARC Medium-Term Strategy 2021–2025 evaluation report**, as endorsed by the Governing Council in May 2025.

The imminent departure of the current Branch Head (end December 2025), Dr. Zdenko Herceg, without a defined succession plan, has created substantial uncertainty around the Branch's future direction. This leadership vacuum threatens the continuity, coherence, and long-term viability of its research portfolio. The Review Panel emphasized the need for rigorous prioritization of strategic goals, highlighting that decisions should be based on organizational mission and priorities rather than sustaining the Branch in its current form. The EGM Branch's broad research scope—including research on epigenetic biomarkers of childhood cancer, epigenetic drivers of cancer progression, toxicology & epigenetics, and HPV-related cancers—spreads resources too thinly, undermining focus and impact in a context of constrained budgets.

The categorization exercise of IARC's projects for 2026–2030 conducted during the Senior Advisory Team (SAT) retreat in September 2025, as outlined in *the Prioritization scenario accompanying the MTS 2026-2030*, has further demonstrated that few EGM projects are mission-critical. In the context of the Agency's budgetary constraints, this underscored the need for rigorous prioritization of the Branch's strategic goals and supports the conclusion that discontinuing the Branch, while redistributing EGM staff, when possible, to other Branches according to their scientific expertise, would maximize efficiency and strengthen the Agency as a whole.

As highlighted in the *Prioritization scenario accompanying the MTS 2026–2030*, scientific programs on **epigenetic early detection biomarkers of childhood cancers** and **molecular studies on infections and cancers (including microbiome studies)** will continue as high-priority research areas, as determined during the SAT retreat in early September. Other EGM research programs, including **epigenetic drivers of cancer progression** and **toxicogenomics**, have been assigned the lowest priority (Tier-4, outside IARC's scope). Consequently, these programs will be phased out from 2026 and **two EGM positions related to these programs have been abolished**.

All EGM Branch personnel will be **reassigned to other Branches**, according to their scientific expertise:

Environment and Lifestyle Epidemiology (ENV) Branch: EGM scientists with expertise in epigenetic early detection markers of childhood cancers.

Early Detection, Prevention and Infections (EPR) Branch: EGM scientists with expertise on HPV-related cancers.

Post-doctoral students will follow their supervisors. Laboratory technicians will also follow their supervisors, **except for two**, who will be reassigned to the **Nutrition and Metabolism (NME)** and **Genomic Epidemiology (GEM) Branches** to meet current needs.

Overall recommendations for EGM - Answer

The RP suggested the following scientific portfolio recommendations for the Secretariat's consideration: *Tangible assets to be preserved include in particular: the access to global cohorts and other types of data from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) as well as methodology and laboratory resources that allows actionable mechanistic understanding of a broad set of cancer risk factor; another asset is the well-functioning system for training junior scientists from LMICs who later become international collaborators to the branch.*

- Fully support the recommendation; preserving tangible assets remains a **priority for IARC**
- EGM Branch priority research areas will be **integrated into other Branches**
- Maintain access to **global cohorts and LMIC data**, and **methodological and laboratory resources** for mechanistic insights into cancer risk factors
- Continue and strengthen **training of junior scientists from LMICs**, who become valuable international collaborators

I fully support this recommendation. Preserving these tangible assets remains a priority for IARC, even if the EGM Branch is phased out and its identified priority research areas are integrated into other Branches. Continued access to global cohorts and LMICs data, together with our methodological and laboratory resources, is essential for generating actionable mechanistic insights into cancer risk factors.

Equally, we are committed to maintaining and further strengthening our established system for training junior scientists from LMICs, who have consistently become valuable international collaborators.

Overall recommendations for EGM - Answer

The RP suggested the following scientific portfolio recommendations for the Secretariat's consideration: The future plan for even more translational research is commendable but will require focus on areas that can immediately translate to intervention. To attain this goal, the RP advises the branch to recruit more junior staff with a clinical background to suggest realistic visions for implementation of findings, such as primary prevention and screening programs.

- Focus on areas that can **immediately translate into interventions** (e.g. primary prevention, screening programs).
- **Existing expertise** in other IARC Branches, especially **EPR**, is sufficient to support this goal.
- EGM scientists moving to EPR will **benefit from and contribute to this expertise.**

I agree that achieving impact requires focusing on areas that can **immediately translate into interventions**, such as **primary prevention and screening programs**.

Existing expertise in other IARC Branches, particularly within the **EPR Branch**, is fully sufficient to support this goal. EGM scientists moving to EPR will be well-positioned to **benefit from and contribute to this expertise**.

Overall recommendations for EGM - Answer

The RP suggested the following scientific portfolio recommendations for the Secretariat's consideration:
The EGM needs to have a full-scale prioritization of their strategic goals, i.e. they need to specify what will be continued and what must be cut in a less well-funded future, based on mission priorities and not based on the aim of making the branch survive. Clear prioritization will allow branch leadership to feel more ownership of their direction and improve competitiveness for external funding opportunities.

- **Prioritization needed:** Decisions should follow **organizational mission and priorities**, not maintaining Branch structure.
- **EGM research too broad:** Epigenetic biomarkers of childhood cancer, epigenetic drivers of cancer progression, toxicology & epigenetics, HPV-related cancers → spreads resources thin.
- **Project review (SAT retreat, Sept 2025):** Few EGM projects are mission-critical; budget constraints highlight need for **rigorous prioritization.**
- **Branch discontinuation decided:** Redistribute EGM staff to other Branches according to **scientific expertise** to maximize efficiency.
- **High-priority EGM research continuing:**
  - ➔ Epigenetic early detection biomarkers of childhood cancers
  - ➔ Molecular studies on infections and cancers, including microbiome studies
- **Lowest-priority programs phased out:** Epigenetic drivers of cancer progression, Toxicogenomics → 2 positions abolished.

Personnel reassignment: EGM staff moved to Branches matching their expertise

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See answer slide 2

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As highlighted in the *Prioritization scenario accompanying the MTS 2026–2030*, scientific programs on **epigenetic early detection biomarkers of childhood cancers** and **molecular studies on infections and cancers (including microbiome studies)** will continue as high-priority research areas, as determined during the SAT retreat in early September. Other EGM research programs, including **epigenetic drivers of cancer progression** and **toxicogenomics**, have been assigned the lowest priority (Tier-4, outside IARC's scope). Consequently, these programs will be phased out from 2026 and **two EGM positions related to these programs have been abolished**.
All EGM Branch personnel will be **reassigned to other Branches**, according to their scientific expertise (as detailed slide 2).

Overall recommendations for EGM - Answer

The RP suggested the following scientific portfolio recommendations for the Secretariat's consideration: It appears that there is a lack of a defined career framework, supports and clear pathways for progression. Scientists and Staff should receive strong mentoring, need to feel more empowered, and a greater sense of belonging and inclusion into IARC should be fostered.

- Recognize the importance of **career framework, mentoring, and sense of belonging.**
- EGM scientists and staff moving to other Branches will benefit from **hosting Branch infrastructure, resources, and mentorship.**
- Integration enhances **professional development, empowerment, collaboration, and inclusion** within IARC.

I acknowledge the importance of a defined career framework, mentoring, and fostering a sense of belonging.

Scientists and EGM staff moving to other Branches will benefit from the hosting Branches' infrastructure, resources, and established mentorship structures, ensuring they are well supported in their professional development. This integration will also enhance opportunities for empowerment, collaboration, and inclusion within IARC.

Thank you

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