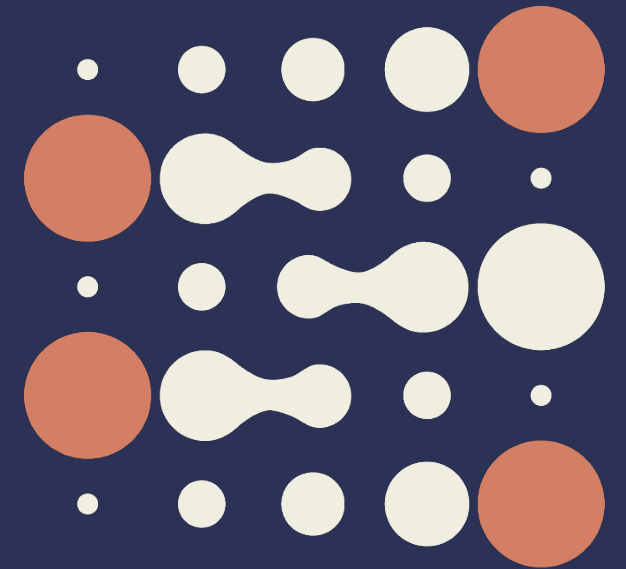


Director's response to the Evidence Synthesis and Classification (ESC) Branch Review

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International Agency
for Research on Cancer



OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ESC

The Review Panel (RP) considered ESC's scientific quality as Outstanding and the relevance of ESC's past work and future plans to IARC's mission to be a perfect fit.

- ESC unites three flagship Programmes within IARC (IHB, IMO, WTC). All three generate worldwide authoritative bodies of evidence and set international standards. The RP is highly impressed with ESC's remarkable leadership, work, vision and contribution of unique and essential evidence, of the highest quality, that can be used to reduce the cancer burden.
- The outstanding productivity despite the pandemic situation is remarkable.
- Future plans for all three Programmes are well articulated, of the highest scientific value, and will maintain ESC as a global leader in evidence synthesis.

Response:

- We thank the RP for their constructive and supportive comments.
- No response required.

Review panel scientific recommendations for ESC (1-3)

1. The RP recognizes the specificities of each of the three Programmes, but whenever appropriate, ESC should keep fostering the synergy between Programme resources, activities and developments.
 - Response: ESC programmes share resources, tools, and approaches whenever feasible (e.g. literature search and screening tools, evidence gap maps, editing and volume production resources)
2. The RP strongly supports the integration of representatives from LMICs (IARC trainees, Visiting Scientists, Summer School attendees, observers, etc.) and early-career researchers in its activities.
 - Response: ESC programmes have continued to recruit IARC early career and visiting scientists from LMICs to support capacity-building in evidence synthesis.
3. The RP was concerned about the difficulties associated with the short-term contracts for some staff members and wondered whether there were some opportunities to help with this.
 - Response: Employment contracts are consistent with IARC and WHO rules

Review panel scientific recommendations for ESC (4-5)

4. The RP encourages ESC to maintain its efforts towards increased dissemination. Advice from external experts in implementation and scientific communication could provide useful guidance. The RP suggests that ESC broadens its knowledge dissemination base to policy makers, stakeholders, and to the general public and patient groups who are increasingly exposed to disinformation.

Response: ESC programmes (IMO, IHB, and WCT) have been actively seeking funding to support additional efforts in communication and information dissemination. Absent such funding, the programmes work with COM to improve information dissemination and communication with existing resources.

5. Editing is an integral part of evidence synthesis in the three ESC Programs. This is a highly labour-intensive, critical step leading to publications and dissemination. The RP encourages ESC to continue exploring ways to facilitate and speed-up the editing process.

Response: We completely agree. WCT has brought on board one additional editor as a staff position during 2024. IMO and IHB have increased external contracting for skilled editing services. We are resource-constrained to hire additional full-time staff editors.

Review panel scientific recommendations for ESC (6-7)

6. The RP encourages the diversification of external funding sources.

Response: WCT relies on book sales for most of its funding and this is anticipated to continue for the foreseeable future. IHB will continue to seek diverse funding sources. IMO is most vulnerable to single-source funding and has been exploring suitable grant funding opportunities (most are not relevant to the evidence synthesis work of IMO).

7. The RP strongly supports ESC's constant efforts and its maintenance of strict policies to stay clear of conflicts of interest to maintain the integrity and credibility of the Branch's outputs and evaluations.

Response: Avoidance and management of conflicts of interest remain a core principle of all the work of ESC. We work closely with IARC's Ethics Office in this regard.

Review panel scientific recommendations for IHB (1)

1. If judged appropriate and feasible, IHB could expand the scope of selective Handbooks to **include recommendations and guidance on policies** for primary prevention & cancer screening based on the scientific evidence reviewed and analyzed by the experts on primary and secondary interventions.

Response: In the upcoming Handbooks (HB21; HB22), we will include a review of the screening activities and of existing recommendations, highlighting possible differences or inconsistencies.

Similarly, we will explore whether WHO would be interested in issuing recommendations based in the evaluations in HB21 and HB22 that will have reached *sufficient evidence*.

Review panel scientific recommendations for IHB (2)

2. If feasible and appropriate, for selected Handbooks on primary prevention, another suggestion would be to integrate information such as **co-exposures, attributable risk fractions, evidence gaps** and **cost-effectiveness** of interventions.

Response: We appreciate the recommendations and will assess their feasibility and appropriateness on an ad-hoc basis in the upcoming Handbooks.

Cost-effectiveness: Such analyses require additional financial & technical resources, with external collaboration. Cost-effectiveness analyses of the strategies evaluated in Handbook 19 are current underway in collaboration with WHO.

Attributable risk fractions: For gastric cancer prevention, we will explore the feasibility to review, or to develop, analyses of attributable risk fractions.

Evidence gaps: We will systematically explore the development of evidence gap maps (EGM) in upcoming Handbooks. We have just finalized the EGM for the interventions and exposures reviewed in HB19. We are currently developing a similar map for the epidemiological evidence reviewed in HB20.

Review panel scientific recommendations for IHB (3-5)

3. It is recommended to **improve modes of dissemination** so that the general public becomes aware of key approaches to cancer prevention. Integrative strategies with the entire Branch to seek advice from external experts on dissemination could be helpful.

Response: We have organized side symposia at international scientific conferences and WHO fora; enhanced our interaction with WHO Regional Office for Europe & WHO-HQ communication offices; and planned a launch of upcoming volume through webinars.

We have implemented the write-up on book reviews in local medical newsletters and print media. We plan to develop a database of stakeholders to whom we can disseminate outcomes.

4. IHB could innovate by introducing new pathways to disseminate information. Though the NEJM reviews are scientifically enriching there is scope to produce additional **short communications** underlying (1) recommendations for policy development at national level and (2) highlighting gaps in evidence needing future research to enable better global preventive approaches.

5. Production of a **newsletter** could also be a good approach to reach out to stakeholders.

Response: This recommendation is well received. A short communication was published following HB20A on alcohol and hormone-receptor positive breast cancer.

Producing a newsletter is time-consuming and may not be suitable given the current rate of production of HBs.

Review panel scientific recommendations for IHB (6)

6. Have a periodic advisory meeting to provide high-level guidance, selection of priority topics for future Handbooks, methods of dissemination

Response: IHB will consider convening an Advisory Committee in late 2028-early 2029 (after HB22) to:

- Review and update the Preambles
- Assess potential topics for the next five years (2029–2033)
- Discuss dissemination strategy at the Branch level
- Identify innovative ways to collect information on KPI
- Other topics of high-level guidance

Review panel scientific recommendations (IMO 1-2)

1. IMO is on a very good course and the RP has no major recommendations for changes.
2. IMO has managed in the past to focus on its core mission and not expand its scope beyond resources available. We recommend that IMO continues to do this despite opportunities and pressures for expansion without additional resources.

Response:

- IMO is mindful of the need to focus on its core mission of cancer hazard identification and is pursuing additional resources to carry out related activities (e.g. funding for a workshop on research recommendations for high priority agents whose carcinogenicity remains unresolved)

Review panel scientific recommendations (IMO 3-5)

3. IMO's should continue prioritizing the evaluation of agents of global relevance, including those commonly encountered in LMICs.
4. The RP recommends that independence between IMO and WHO evaluations be maintained and recognized as equally important products.
5. Monographs should be released as early as possible post-production, respecting IMO's internal processes.

Response:

- ❑ The agents announced in 2024 for future evaluation all have substantial relevance in LMICs (e.g. gasoline, hepatitis D virus, atrazine, alachlor, vinclozolin); IARC will continue to prioritize such agents
- ❑ IMO and the Director's office are working in close collaboration with WHO colleagues to revise the interim SOP, recognizing the mutual interests yet independence of these programmes
- ❑ IMO continually strives to release information in the meeting summary and the full *Monographs* volume as soon as feasible after each meeting. More resources would aid in faster publication.

Review panel scientific recommendations (IMO 6)

6. Currently, the *IARC Monographs* programme is supported at 60% by grants from a single country. This is an untenable situation that puts this critically important and globally unique public health resource at increasing risk, should the priorities of the major funder change or should funding lines decrease. Accordingly, the review panel applauds attempts by IARC to seek additional major sources of funding to diversify sources of support for the *Monographs*. It is essential that such funding, whatever the source, permits the *Monographs* programme to retain its strong independence from vested interests, which is necessary to ensure the high public confidence in the evaluations conducted by the programme.

Response :

- IMO is seeking additional funding to supplement existing resources and would welcome suggestions from SC members. The work of IMO is outside the funding scope of most grant opportunities. The need for strict conflict-of-interest management limits private funding source potential.

Review panel scientific recommendations (WCT 1-2)

- 1. The online version of the Blue Books' 5th edition should be printed soon, to avoid overlapping with the 6th edition**

Response:

- Printing of 5th edition books is progressing well with 10/14 books printed, balance four books nearing publication. All to be completed in 2025.**
- 6th edition kick started with three books (DIG, Breast, FGT) and another book (SFT) is to be initiated soon in late 2024. Printing of all to be completed in 2026.**

- 2. WCT should consider prioritization of its planned projects.**

Response:

- We are mindful of this, and Blue Book production has been prioritized over all other WCT projects.**

Review panel scientific recommendations (WCT 3-4)

3. WCT needs to work closely with LMICs pathologists to mitigate the impact of genetic molecular classification of tumours.

- WCT/LMIC liaising subcommittee was formed to give recommendations on how to mitigate the impact of molecular genetic classifications on LMIC's to the Editorial boards.**
- LMIC pathologist is included in each 6th editorial board to oversee LMIC interests. Co-authors are included from LMIC settings to bring in LMIC perspectives.**
- Pathologists from an LMIC setting has been recruited as an ECVS**

4. The website represents a unique window through which WCT may reinforce its leadership in the pathology field. Together with the many collaborations and partnerships established, WCT can emphasize the training of pathologists, particularly in LMICs.

- Web based digital image library is being expanded with future AI solutions planned mainly to benefit LMIC pathologists**
- Classification updates continue to be presented at LMIC pathology forums supplemented with journal publications.**
- Ongoing collaborations with external partners have been strengthened.**

Review panel scientific recommendations (WCT 5-6)

5. WCT may have to consider diversifying its funding model in the medium/longer term.

Response:

- Funding model is strengthened for the growing web subscriptions by implementing facilities for institutional subscriptions, in addition to the existing individual subscription model.

6. The WCT emphasized the need for more website support given the increasing utilisation of web-based applications. The RP also has concerns about the reliance of website maintenance activities on one member of personnel.

Response:

- New recruitments have been made to strengthen and support WCT web needs

Thank you

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