

## Transcript of Rai Interview Part 4: History of iwCLL

Gerald Marti: I wanted to start with how the iwCLL was founded and I remember that when I met with Dr. Binet, I stood in front of his apartment house on the—

Kanti Rai: On the river.

Marti: —on the river and he took me out to his apartment and showed me the room where the meeting was held and where the first dinner was and then he started telling me about how he started coming to the US—I want to say Cornell and maybe it was Rockefeller University where he went—and I think he met Eugene Cronkite, and through Eugene Cronkite he met you. Maybe you remember differently.

Rai: No, no, no.

Marti: Anyway, you go ahead.

Rai: Okay. The origin of International Workshop on CLL, or iwCLL, as we call it now, was very small and nobody knew that it would become a formal organization. And as I recall, after Dr. Jacques-Louis Binet had devised his staging system which was immediately accepted, it came a couple of years after our staging system had come out, and Binet invited a group of CLL-interested colleagues from around the world to Pitié Salpêtrière, the hospital where he was himself located, and what was the basis whom he sent invitations, I do not know. But I do know that because I attended it with my own mentors, both Cronkite and Sawitsky, I think Arthur Sawitsky also. Do you have the list?

Marti: I don't. I don't recall having it but that's going to be worth tracking down.

Rai: Yeah. I think Arthur Sawitsky was there and Gene Cronkite and Gene had—well, actually, Binet had already known me or known of me through the staging paper that had come out in 1975, *Blood*.<sup>1</sup> And when he ended—Jacques-Louis knew, as you pointed out, Gene Cronkite. And he knew that I was in Gene Cronkite's group. So, he felt that it was only natural that in his list of invitees he included me, and Arthur was one of the co-authors of the staging paper. And at that time, he also had from the US, I think Pradeep Chandra. Chandra was at that time doing the potassium-40 body burden of cell mass study<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rai KR, Sawitsky A, Cronkite EP, et al. Clinical staging of chronic lymphocytic leukemia. *Blood*. 1975 Aug;46(2):219-34.

<sup>2</sup> Chandra P, Sawitsky A, Chanana AD, et al. Correlation of total body potassium and leukemic cell mass in patients with chronic lymphocytic leukemia. *Blood*. 1979 Apr;53(4):594-603.

at Brookhaven and that, I think those were the three from America, four from America, Cronkite, Rai, Sawitsky, and Chandra. I do not think that Michael Keating or anybody else had become known in CLL field at that time.

In any case, so, we were a group of people meeting for the first time in a very nice, largish room, very collegially seated so that it was not a conference setting. It was a meeting, a workshop setting, and everybody got to know each other. It was a two-day gathering and I know that Emili Montserrat was there, people from Sweden and other Nordic countries. I know that Guillaume Dighiero, who was Binet's protégé as I was a protégé of Cronkite and Sawitsky. And from Britain, Danny Catovsky was there, and I do not recall whether David Galton was there. He was there?

Marti: I don't know. I can't recall. I think Dr. Binet told me, but I don't recall.

Rai: Well, we have a record somewhere. Any case, we were about 14, 15 people, and we had a great exchange of ideas, a great level of camaraderie, and a wonderful experience, social and intellectual experience in discussing CLL. But no plans were made as to any future meetings. I think Dr. Binet had obtained some funds which supported our travel and our stay in Paris, and we all went away extremely happy. Then—now none of this thing that I'm mentioning now has ever been formally recorded or even scrutinized or challenged for the validity. But my sense is that then, a year or less than two years later, we had some international meeting, either it was ASH or whatever.

And most of the people who were at the Paris meeting happened to be there. This was probably in Toronto, Montreal or Toronto, in Canada. And it was—I think I who contacted all the participants of Paris meeting who were also present in this meeting in Canada, and invited them, I think by phone because there was no email and no regular mail because it took a long time, I think by phone while we were all there to get together. And we had a second meeting essentially consisting of all the Paris attendees and a few more. I am sure that there is some record somewhere. And then—and everybody was happy to be there, and we just followed up on what had transpired in Paris, and then the third time it was again some occasion, probably again an ASH meeting.

And by this third meeting, we started to call it an International Workshop on CLL. And Emili Monserrat, Dan Catovsky, and—who else—Guillaume, and Binet. And by this time, Binet and I had by no acclamation, but by sheer acceptance, became the initiators or leaders of it and by self-appointment, if you want to call it. But we were considered to be the people largely because our mutual friendship,

trust, and warmth between us, and because Binet staging and Rai staging was the prevalent-to-well-accepted staging systems, and therefore it became natural that the two of us were in the leadership. Then it became like that.

Although at this time, we also invited Jaksic, Jaksic who had developed the TTM system which was already cumbersome but made some sense but it was impossible to put into clinical practice. And the first meeting, we also had in Paris Mogens Hansen. I think he was there.

Marti: Well, that I'm sure I did know.

Rai: I think so. And then it became a formalized thing and we were meeting every two years. And I remember somewhere along the line in Barcelona, we had a formal meeting to put together the guidelines for diagnosis of CLL, of response, definition, to treatment, and all the other things that go with that.

Marti: Would the Barcelona meeting be the fourth meeting or was that an ancillary meeting?

Rai: It was an ancillary meeting. It was a meeting called just for writing up—and at this time I think Robert Peter Gale, Bob Gale, had become one of the principals of iwCLL. And then with Gale we organized a couple of two or three meetings of iwCLL. One was held in Napa Valley, and Bob was very resourceful in getting industry support and funding for travel support for colleagues coming from abroad.

Marti: The Napa Valley meeting is where fludarabine got its wings?

Rai: Yes.

Marti: Okay.

Rai: Yes, I think so. And then we had another meeting in the US. It was in St. Louis, at the time of an ASH meeting in St. Louis, and at that time I believe Carlo Croce was introduced to iwCLL. And at this meeting, Michael Keating and Tom Kipps became actively involved in CLL. And then there was a very important meeting in Paris, at which Lee Nadler, Kipps, Grever, Michael Grever, and Keating. The US presence became much more impressive and formidable in Paris.

Marti: After the Napa Valley one?

Rai: Yes.

Marti: As I remember, I think that both Nadler and Kipps were present at the Napa Valley meeting.

Rai: Yes.

Marti: Okay. And Keating too. I just maybe don't remember. But it sounds like the Paris meeting after the St. Louis meeting made the American presence well known.

Rai: Yes. So that, I think somewhere along the line we recognized that Germany was not represented and we proposed that Hartmut Döhner who had just published in 2000, December, the *New England Journal of Medicine* paper on FISH cytogenetics in CLL,<sup>3</sup> and Michael Hallek who had become the chairman of the German CLL group and had organized extremely successful and impressive German CLL study group meetings with international advisors present. So, we incorporated those two persons in the iwCLL leadership committee membership and soon after that, invited Peter Hillmen to become a member of iwCLL committee.

And I must say that an important contribution was made by Stuart Smith. Dr. Smith, who had done his PhD thesis on a CLL-related topic and he had become a principal of Darwin, Darwin organ—you know—

Marti: The organization.

Rai: Company. And not only for assisting us in holding these conferences or workshops every two years but Stuart Smith by virtue of his own interest in CLL became a good friend and adviser until he left Darwin Gray. So, we progressively enlarge with Dr. Binet sort of retiring, and we needed to include other people, and these were the people who were added, so that Kipps and Keating were added from the United States when Sawitsky and Cronkite sort of retired to replace those two. And Galton was there to advise but he was never formally, he never liked to travel. So, Hillmen came when Danny Catovsky reached the retirement age, but Danny did not retire from iwCLL.

It's a very good organization, very collegial, very friendly and we do not have any rules and regulations or by-laws or anything. All we do is every two years hold this congress. It has become very large from 15 to 17 people in the first Paris meeting, to, I was told at the recent meeting, in September, October in Barcelona in 2009, there were more than a thousand people all studying CLL.

Marti: More than 2,000?

Rai: Yeah, about that number.

Marti: And do you recall what it was in London, in?

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<sup>3</sup> Döhner H, Stilgenbauer S, Benner A, et al. Genomic aberrations and survival in chronic lymphocytic leukemia. *N Engl J Med*. 2000 Dec 28;343(26):1910-6.

Rai: Just a few less. London was...

Marti: Pretty big also?

Rai: Yes, yeah.

Marti: And that was 2007 probably?

Rai: Right, right.