



# SWOG Latin America Initiative NEWSLETTER



Strengthening Relationships for Latino Cancer Patients

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## Letter from the SWOG Executive Officer for International Affairs

Dear Readers,

**S**ix months have passed since our last SWOG Latin America Initiative (SLAI) Newsletter. Since then, we have been actively working on several initiatives we want to share with you.

Last January, we convened SWOG leadership and key stakeholders for a strategic meeting in Seattle. Our objective was to define the goals, strategies, and activities that would guide us in fulfilling our vision of excellence in clinical research for Hispanic researchers and patients.

The SLAI's mission is to improve the lives among all Hispanic populations through supporting cancer clinical trials and translational research. This vision closely aligns with SWOG's mission to significantly improve lives through clinical trials and translational research.



Chavez Mac Gregor

Our priorities encompass several goals that guide our efforts. Firstly, we commit to providing support to Latin American cancer researchers and research institutions to enhance their institutional capacity for conducting high-quality cancer clinical trials. Another goal is to foster excellence in clinical research by promoting the best practices in study design, data collection, and

study management at SLAI sites. Additionally, we will continue to work at identifying barriers to participation and proposing solutions that will increase participation and accrual. To achieve this, we will continue to invest in clinical research and provide support to clinical research that Latin American investigators and their patients can and want to participate in. By fostering active academic interactions, we seek to establish bidirectional relationships that benefit both US-based and Latin America-based investigators.

To further advance our field and make a meaningful impact on the millions of Hispanic patients in the US, it is crucial to develop more inclusive protocols that specifically address cancers relevant to Hispanic and other minority populations. Within our corner of SWOG, we will advocate for increasing the number of protocols that address the cancer burden in Hispanic communities in the US and Latin America. By doing so, we not only enhance our understanding of these cancers but also promote greater inclusivity in research.

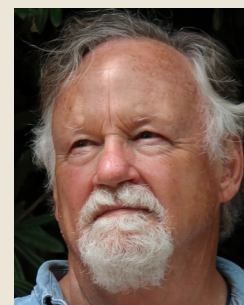
We recognize that these goals are ambitious. However, in addition to being practical, we also want to be aspirational and intentional in our growth and efforts. As we approach our 15-year milestone

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MARIANA CHAVEZ  
MAC GREGOR, MD, MS

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Every project has an origin story. Most of our memories of the SLAI at SWOG and CRAB begin with **Dr. Crowley**, CRAB co-founder and one of the early visionaries for the SLAI. In this column, Dr. Crowley shares his story about how SLAI came to be. **In part one**, he related how collaborations in Latin America took root in SWOG and, **in part two**, he continued his story with the first collaborations in gastric cancer. In part three below, he takes us through the creation of the SLAI as a formal initiative ...



## The Story of the SWOG Latin America Initiative

### PART THREE: EVOLUTION OF THE INITIATIVE

**The success of the *H. pylori* study S0701 activation in 2009 convinced Larry Baker**, then-SWOG chair, that a more permanent collaboration in Latin America was feasible and desirable. He created a position for SWOG executive officer for international affairs and initiated a series of meetings at SWOG and at ASCO with oncology leaders from the region.

Larry envisioned inviting the national cancer institutes of key countries in Latin America to join SWOG as members, with the aim of strengthening their research efforts, contributing key demographics to SWOG studies, and eventually forming the foundation of a regional cancer cooperative group. The vision was presented at a meeting at the Instituto Nacional de Cancerología (INC) in Mexico City in 2009. Alejandro Mohar, director of the INC at the time, was on board with this vision, and the INC joined SWOG in 2010, thus becoming the first member of the SLAI.

In 2012, Larry Baker, Manuel Valdivieso (then-executive officer for international affairs), and I embarked on an excursion through South America, visiting the national cancer



Larry Baker, DO

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institutes of Brazil (Rio), Peru (Lima), and Colombia (Bogotá). The Brazilian investigators did not feel ready to pursue SWOG membership, but Tatiana Vidaurre, the director of the Instituto Nacional de Enfermedades Neoplásicas (INEN) in Peru, and Raul Murillo, general director of the Instituto Nacional de Cancerología (INC) in Bogotá, expressed interest. Both institutes joined SWOG in 2013.

As the national cancer institutes of Mexico, Peru, and Colombia sought to participate in SWOG trials, it became clear that a concerted effort was needed by SWOG staff to reduce the barriers to their participation. With the support of Jo Horn and the Hope Board, a part-time position was created for the SWOG Operations Office in San Antonio to facilitate Latin American participation in SWOG trials. Over time, this

position was shared between Operations and the SWOG Data Management Center at CRAB and moved completely to CRAB in 2021.

Shortly after, Chilean Cooperative Group for Oncologic Research in Chile, Universidad de la República in Uruguay, and Latin American Cooperative Oncology Group (LACOG) in Brazil became SWOG members. In these countries, each main member joined SWOG with one or more sub-affiliates, and not all were national cancer institutes as in the past. We hope this ability to expand clinical trial access to different types of cancer treatment centers in the region may increase interest and participation in SWOG clinical trials and continue to reinforce clinical trial training and access to clinical trials for cancer specialists and their patients in the region.

as a key SWOG program, it becomes increasingly imperative to align the SLAI's efforts with the Group's mission. At the same time, we must increase the inclusivity, relevance, and impact of cancer clinical trials among Hispanic communities for both researchers and patients in Latin America and the US.

I also had the great honor and privilege to be invited by Dr. Blanke to share our vision at the plenary session during our Spring Group meeting. It was a great opportunity to share with our members what we do, what we want to achieve, and to invite you to learn more about us and advance our initiatives.

As always, a big shout out to The Hope Foundation for their continued support and thank you, reader, for reading this newsletter and learning about efforts in the SLAI.

Gracias,



Mariana Chavez Mac Gregor, MD, MS

## SLAI Updates, Operations, and Future Directions in Research

Since the last edition of the SLAI Newsletter, both Colombia and Peru have activated SWOG studies! At right is the current list of studies that are activated or in process of activation at various SLAI institutions.

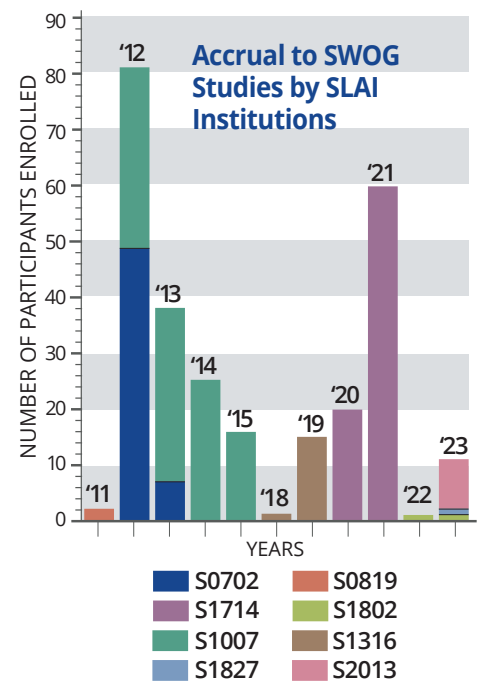
To expedite the activation process and facilitate timely involvement of SLAI institutions in studies relevant to Hispanics and Latin America, SWOG encourages committees to actively strive to incorporate SLAI participation at the earliest possible stage and consider protocol modifications to facilitate international compliance with local regulations. By doing so, SLAI institutions can bypass the need to wait for future protocol revisions and expedite the activation process.

The SLAI coordinating team is diligently working to synchronize the efforts of various stakeholders, aiming to overcome existing barriers that are hindering the prompt activation of several studies. Additionally, they are eagerly anticipating the inclusion of interested SLAI institutions in several other concepts and studies, such as S1703, S1918, and S2104. Moreover, the possibility of opening multiple studies from other collaborative groups is being explored within the SLAI. Stay tuned for further updates on this exciting development in future editions...

Study	Activated	In activation process
S1501		Chile
S1802	Colombia, Mexico	Chile (pending CTSU approval of IRB certification)
S1827	Colombia, Mexico	Chile
S1914		Chile (local regulatory hurdles)
S2010	Peru	Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Uruguay
S2013	Chile, Uruguay	Colombia, Mexico
EA1151		Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Uruguay
EA8134		Mexico
NRG HN009		Chile, Mexico

Although study feasibility and institutional and national cancer priorities influence a SLAI site's decision on whether or not to participate in a given protocol, it is worth noting that SLAI recruitment tends to ebb and flow. Right now, SLAI recruitment appears to be on an upward trajectory. The graph at the right depicting SLAI recruitment trends over time illustrates the upward trend nicely.

The cancer burden is projected to increase in US Hispanic populations, already the largest minority population in the US. As protocols relevant to Hispanic populations increase, the SLAI hopes to make significant scientific contributions to understanding of cancer care in this population, strengthening prevention, treatment, and survival for Hispanics no matter where they find themselves in the Americas.







# Spotlight on Colombia

**The Instituto Nacional de Cancerología (INC, in English, the National Cancer Institute), the SWOG main member site in Bogotá, Colombia, has just celebrated 10 years of SWOG membership.** The INC represents the largest public cancer institute and serves Colombia as a high complexity reference hospital and center of research. Serving 27,809 cancer patients in 2022, 17% of these were new cases, 64% were women, and 42% were under 65 years old.

Recently named a university hospital, the INC aims to expand their academic and oncological trainings and provides the only training in the country to radiation oncologists. With an in-house statistical department, the institute publishes a clinical journal, circulates national guidelines for clinical oncology, provides public health guidance to the Ministry of Health on cancer control, and coordinates a National Research Network.

The SLAI counts on many key collaborators in the INC. Dr. Juliana Rodríguez Castillo has served as the SWOG principal investigator at the institute since 2022. Dr. Jesús Acosta has had

several official roles within SWOG at the INC including SWOG principal investigator and co-investigator, and he is currently finishing his second term as SLAI representative on the SWOG Board of Governors. In 2018, he coordinated a highly successful SLAI training, which the SLAI hopes to repeat with the INC later this year. Ms. Cristina Sabogal joined the institute in 2022 as a research coordinator and has been key in SWOG protocol activation.

Dr. Eduardo Guerrero, radiation oncologist and physicist, presented the INC's activities at the spring SWOG group meeting. Previously, the INC recruited to protocols S1007, S1316, and S1714. They recently activated S1802 and S1827 and are working towards activation of protocols S2010 and S2013. He is happy to be participating as a radiation oncologist in several of these protocols!

How does the INC activate a SWOG



protocol? When the SWOG team at the INC learns about a new protocol or proposal that the SLAI may be able to join, they review it and assign it to INC clinical experts in the corresponding area of research to evaluate local interest and feasibility. If they want to participate and SWOG has confirmed their participation, the general director must review and approve the protocol. The SWOG team can then submit the protocol to the local IRB and begin completing administrative requirements. Protocols involving drugs not approved in Colombia require approval from the national regulatory agency (INVIMA), which performs a function similar to that of the FDA.

Dr. Guerrero also outlined some of the challenges the INC faces when activating SWOG protocols. These include: barriers to establishing international agreements in languages other than Spanish, national regulations for biomedical specimen handling, low correlation between available protocols and regional cancer burden, and limited protected time for clinical research.

The SLAI is eagerly anticipating the upcoming annual SLAI clinical trials training course, which will be hosted by the INC in November 2023. This year's course will focus on cancers caused by infectious agents; several high priority cancers in Latin America fall under this category. We hope some of you will join us!

**WANT TO LEARN MORE?**

We host SLAI symposiums at each group meeting and you are invited to attend! At the spring 2023 symposium, we focused on the cancer burden in adolescent and young adults and symptom management and control. To view the last symposium and learn more about SLAI institutions' participation in SWOG, we hope you will watch the recorded meeting here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYrqNQ1am5Q&feature=youtu.be>

**Irene Tamí-Maury, DMD, DrPH, MSc**, collaborates with the SLAI as an investigator and speaker. Currently serving as a member of SWOG's diversity, equity and inclusion monitoring committee, she holds the position of assistant professor in the Department of Epidemiology, Human Genetics, and Environmental Sciences, School of Public Health, The University of Texas Health Science Center.



## Bridging the Gap: Empowering Latin American Oncologists to Enhance Adolescent and Young Adult Recruitment in Cancer Clinical Trials

**Adolescents and young adults (AYAs)** facing cancer deserve every opportunity to access cutting-edge treatments and contribute to advancing medical knowledge. However, AYA underrepresentation in cancer clinical trials poses a significant challenge. In Latin America, where socioeconomic and cultural factors interplay, it becomes imperative for cancer care professionals to reflect on the barriers and seize opportunities that exist within their unique environment.

Recent research in the United States sheds light on the barriers hindering AYA enrollment in cancer clinical trials. Limited trial availability and eligibility perceptions, physician gatekeeping, time constraints, and financial burdens emerge as common obstacles. Yet, Latin American oncologists must recognize that these barriers are not isolated; they intersect with the socio-economic and cultural realities of their patients.

Language barriers, for instance, can impede effective communication and comprehension, affecting patients',

parents', and guardians' understanding of trial options. Moreover, low health literacy rates may limit AYAs' ability to navigate the complex clinical trial landscape, hindering their informed decision-making process. The stigma surrounding cancer and lack of awareness about available cancer trials may further discourage AYA participation.

Latin American cancer care providers hold the key to overcoming such challenges. By fostering collaboration between medical and pediatric oncology teams, they can create an integrated care approach that supports AYAs and their families throughout their treatment journey. Sharing knowledge and expertise across disciplines empowers oncologists to identify suitable cancer clinical trials for AYAs and facilitate open conversations about trial participation.

Education and awareness also play a crucial role. Oncologists, research staff, caregivers, and AYAs themselves must be well-informed about the availability and potential

benefits of clinical trials. By providing comprehensive information in culturally appropriate ways, Latin American oncologists can empower AYAs to make informed decisions, ensuring their active engagement in the trial process.

Furthermore, financial barriers should not be overlooked. In Latin America, where economic disparities persist, innovative approaches are needed. Oncologists can explore partnerships with government entities or philanthropic organizations to secure funding and support AYAs in accessing clinical trials without undue financial burden.

As Latin American oncologists, we have a responsibility to address these challenges head-on. By actively engaging in discussions, sharing experiences, and collaborating with stakeholders, we can drive progress. Together, we can design culturally tailored interventions that break down barriers, foster inclusion, and improve AYA recruitment in cancer clinical trials.

Let us embrace this opportunity to shape a brighter future for AYAs facing cancer in Latin America. By amplifying their voices, advocating for their needs, and pushing the boundaries of clinical research, we can revolutionize AYA care and ensure that no young life is left behind.

# The Hope Foundation and the SLAI

*In 2017, I was invited for the first time to present at one of the SLAI meetings, not knowing how my research in cancer prevention would fit into the SWOG agenda. The following year I successfully applied for The Hope Foundation Impact Award, which made it possible for me to conduct the STOP Program, a smoking cessation educational effort in collaboration with two major cancer centers in South America (NCI-Colombia and INEN-Peru). The main outcome paper of the STOP Program is published, right after we completed the No Cost Extension. The manuscript was accepted for publication in its original version by the Journal of Cancer Education. The STOP Program allowed me to meet so many dedicated clinicians, researchers, and staff members passionate about improving cancer care in Latin America. We are now exploring funding mechanisms for implementing and disseminating the STOP Program to other countries in the region.*

**- Irene Tamí-Maury, DMD, DrPH, MSc**

**As The Hope Foundation celebrates its 30 year anniversary**, the SLAI team would like to extend a heartfelt thanks to the foundation for making each year of the SLAI possible! Their steadfast support plays a vital role in our program's functioning and has allowed us to bring Latin American investigators and staff to SWOG group meetings, hold an annual clinical trial course at one SLAI member institution, create program management infrastructure, and more. In the spring, twelve SLAI investigators attended the SWOG group meeting—a record!

The Hope Foundation has partnered with the SLAI from the get-go, and even as a group of SWOG leadership met to define SLAI's future within SWOG, The Hope Foundation helped facilitate—quite literally—SLAI's path forward. As Dr. Mariana Chavez Mac Gregor alluded to in her Executive Letter, we have a better understanding of what is possible today and what may be possible tomorrow. She states: "The Hope Foundation has been our unwavering partner as we work to elevate oncologic research in Latin America – and their belief in our cause and willingness to partner with us has been instrumental in advancing our efforts."

The Hope Foundation's grant opportunities and supportive staff have been instrumental in nurturing new investigators and research, particularly those without committees or pathways that fit within SWOG (see testimonial above). As the SLAI continues to refine itself as a program and searches for long-term solutions to sustainability, The Hope Foundation has provided the SLAI with a bridge.



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