



SWOG Latin America Initiative NEWSLETTER

Strengthening Relationships for Latino Patients with Cancer

VOLUME FOUR | ISSUE TWO | SUMMER 2025



LETTER FROM THE SWOG EXECUTIVE OFFICER FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Dear Readers,

We are excited to share the latest news and highlights from the SWOG Latin America Initiative (SLAI).

While this issue reflects the energy and momentum of recent activities, we want to acknowledge an important program update: SWOG has temporarily paused patient recruitment to network group trials at SWOG institutions outside of the United States due to recent changes in the National Cancer Institute's ability to fund international collaborations. We are currently awaiting guidance on how we might restructure the program to preserve key collaborations or explore new directions. Although the articles featured in this issue reflect plans and progress prior to this pause, we remain hopeful and optimistic about the future.

As is now tradition, we hosted a vibrant and well-attended symposium during the SWOG spring group meeting in San Francisco, bringing together local

and Latin American investigators. This year's focus was on gastrointestinal malignancies—an area of growing global concern, particularly in light of emerging epidemiological patterns such as younger age at diagnosis. The session was co-led by two outstanding Latin American investigators, Dr. Bettina Müller from Chile and Dr. Erika Ruiz from Mexico, both recognized leaders and content experts in the field.

We were honored to welcome leadership from the SWOG GI committee. Dr. Philip Gold delivered a talk titled "Colon Cancer Research and the NCTN Network," highlighting collaborative opportunities and evolving



Dr. Mariana Chavez Mac Gregor

research priorities. Dr. Lisa Kachnic followed with "Anorectal Cancer Research and the NCTN Network," emphasizing the importance of international engagement in clinical trials. Dr. Iván Lyra of Uruguay, an alumnus of the Early-Stage Investigator Training Course, shared some of the lessons he learned while developing a de-escalation trial for elderly patients with resectable gastric cancer. Since the proposal could not move forward in SWOG after the National Cancer Institute Task Force review, he offered advice for other investigators looking to follow a similar path. He also discussed his plans to identify alternate funding sources for his study and described how he and his mentors continue working to improve the outcomes for patients with gastric cancer. These presentations sparked a broader roundtable discussion about current and future GI collaborations and underscored the

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JOIN A DISCUSSION ABOUT BREAST CANCER RESEARCH IN HIGH-RISK POPULATIONS AND LATIN AMERICA

You are invited to attend the next Latin America symposium! In any symposium, expect to learn about research areas of interest in Latin America and the SWOG sites in the region. At its next symposium, the SLAI is excited to partner with experts in the US and Latin America to discuss ongoing breast cancer studies in the network groups in both regions, and to explore future areas of research for mutual impact.



LETTER FROM PAGE 1

value of investigator-led innovation.

In this issue, you'll find more information on Dr. Erika Ruiz's presentation about the LEGACY study and its implications for gastric cancer research in Latin America—and we invite you to view the recorded talks and materials on the SWOG website. You'll also find updates from our partner institutions across Colombia, Uruguay, Peru, and Chile, along with a spotlight on Mexico. Dr. Paula Cabrera at the Instituto Nacional de Cancerología (INCan) in Mexico presented an overview of how SLAI activities are scaling up, reflecting strong local engagement and institutional commitment.

We are also pleased to report continued momentum in patient accrual. Chile has achieved exceptional performance over the past year, and Mexico remains a steady contributor—both a testament to the dedication of our

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site teams. Since so much of this work relies on effective regulatory coordination and trial activation, we are proud to profile Dr. Gabriela Mora, lead oncology research professional at INCan in Mexico. For over 15 years, Dr. Mora has been instrumental in building and strengthening clinical research

infrastructure. Her leadership and long-standing commitment embody the collaborative spirit of SLAI.

Looking ahead, we're thrilled to announce that our fall 2025 Latin America symposium at the SWOG group meeting will focus on breast cancer—a pressing priority across Latin America and a space where new trials are rapidly emerging. We look forward to another meaningful gathering that deepens partnerships and drives progress in cancer research across the region.

Thank you for your ongoing interest in and support of the SLAI. Our work would not be possible without the steadfast backing of The Hope Foundation, SWOG leadership, the SWOG network operations group, and each of you.

Warm regards,

Dr. Mariana Chavez Mac Gregor

NATIONAL CANCER INSTITUTE

Global Cancer Research and Control Seminar Series
SWOG and Its Expansion into Latin America

Mariana Chavez Mac Gregor, M.D., M.Sc.
Professor of Health Services Research
The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center

DATE
July 10, 2025

TIME
10:00 a.m.–11:00 a.m. ET

CMEs Now Available—This activity has been approved for
AMA PRA Category 1 Credits™

Dr. Mariana Chavez Mac Gregor was invited to speak at the NCI's Global Cancer Research and Control Seminar Series on July 10th about SWOG's collaborations in Latin America and the impact of these efforts. A recording of "SWOG and Its Expansion into Latin America" is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MfOkSMMARMU>.

SLAI UPDATES

As mentioned in our previous newsletter, SLAI accrued over 200 patients in 2024. A notable achievement after the spring 2025 SWOG group meeting was reached when the SWOG site in Chile earned a voting seat on the SWOG Board of Governors—a first for a SLAI site! This requires an average accrual of 25 patients per year over three years, highlighting the site’s hard work and contributions to network group clinical research.

Accrual slowed in the first quarter of 2025 as several studies closed and sites prepared to launch new trials. However, projections indicate a sharp increase in accrual during the second half of 2025, as more studies approach activation (see graph).

We’re especially excited about our growing collaborations with other network groups, and we deeply appreciate their support in including Latin American sites in their trials. Notable upcoming studies include:

- **NRG:** SLAI sites are preparing to open BR008 and BR009 (both breast studies). Both have already activated at the SWOG site in Peru and should activate any day at the SWOG site in Mexico.
- **Alliance:** Sites are working through regulatory approvals for A002101 (colorectal) and have completed feasibility reviews for A012303 (breast, pending network group approval of their participation).
- **ECOG-ACRIN:** Mexico and Colombia are approved for EA4232 (T-cell lymphoma) but cannot work on activation until a future protocol amendment; Mexico is also close to opening EA8134 (penile).
- **Canadian Cancer Trials Group:** Collaboration is underway on PR26 (prostate); sites are currently working on translation of the protocol, which is required for regulatory submissions.

All of this, plus an impressive list of SWOG studies! With this uptick in activity, several sites are exploring scaling up strategies (see article on

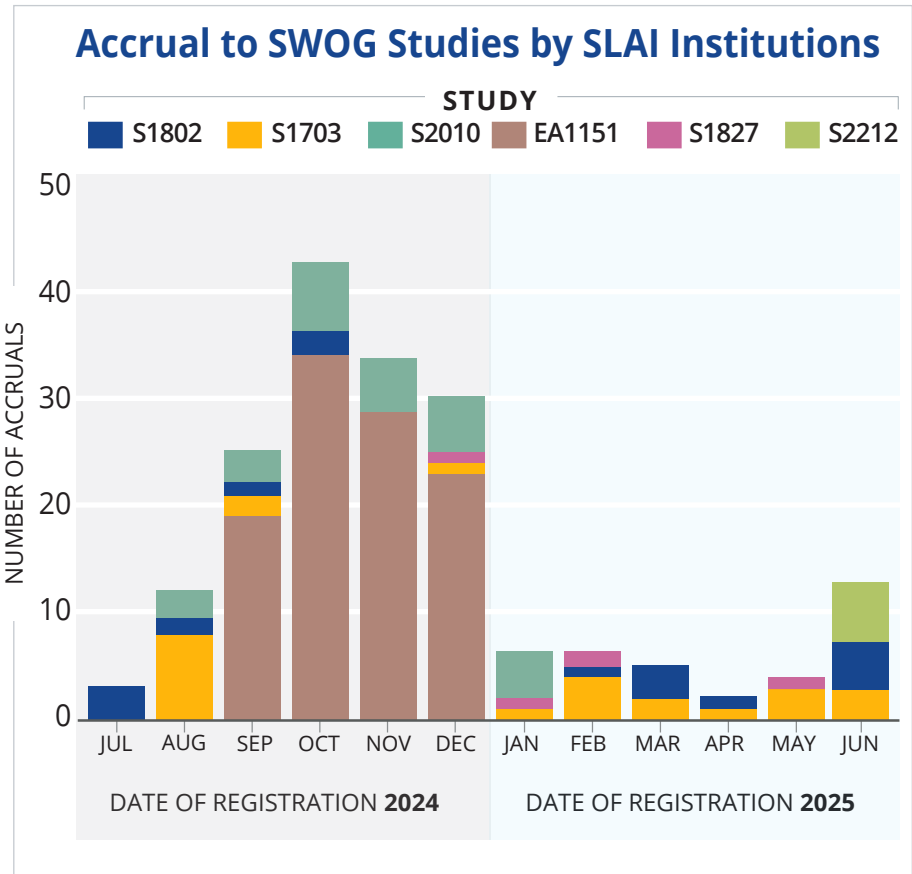
Mexico later in this edition).

From an operational perspective, we’ve implemented several key infrastructure improvements to support cross-institutional collaboration and streamline the workload among sites. This includes improved protocol tracking systems, where sites provide monthly updates on the status of protocol activation for their sites, and a comprehensive feasibility review tool, which includes both a long-form version and a streamlined checklist. This latter tool addresses common international

participation issues in network group trials and standard feasibility topics.

In support of coordination and shared learning, Latin American SWOG site coordinators now meet weekly via Discord, an online platform that allows real-time and asynchronous communication. These sessions enable collaboration on protocol translations and foster discussion on administrative processes, trial activation, and recruitment strategies.

Dacia Christin, the SLAI project manager, continues to provide Spanish-language clinical operations trainings for SWOG activities a few times a year, and she is excited about future collaborations with a quality assurance expert from UC San Diego who has volunteered to offer additional trainings in Spanish on regulatory compliance and quality assurance for network group trials.



INVESTIGATOR UPDATES

From Hope Foundation Seed Funding to Regional Funding: Dr. Javier Retamales' Digital Health Project Gains Momentum!

A core goal of The Hope Foundation for Cancer Research SWOG Early Exploration and Development (SEED) funding is to support early-stage projects with the potential to scale through future, larger funding opportunities. In 2024, Dr. Javier Retamales received SEED



Dr. Retamales

funding to support a pilot testing the quality, compliance, and acceptability of data collected using ALVA ePRO, a digital symptom monitoring tool, from informal care givers about their loved ones' symptoms in the last few days before their death.

The initiative was the first project proposed from a SLAI investigator supported through the SEED funding, which aims to foster locally driven, patient-centered innovations in cancer care and research. Dr. Javier Retamales and the palliative care team at Hospital Sótero del Río in Santiago, Chile successfully completed the pilot and published initial results in the *Journal of Clinical Oncology* in May 2025 (read the abstract here: https://ascopubs.org/doi/abs/10.1200/JCO.2025.43.16_suppl.11128).

We are excited to report that this project has evolved! The new project, titled "Monitoreo digital de síntomas con ALVA ePRO para reducir visitas no programadas en cuidados paliativos del Hospital Sótero del Río" (*Digital Symptom Monitoring to Reduce Unscheduled Palliative Care Visits at the Hospital Sótero del Río*), has been selected as one of the 16 winning proposals through the 2025 Competitive Fund of the Santiago Regional Council (Consejo Regional Santiago). The new focus is now looking at symptoms over the past several months in living patients with advanced cancer.

These regional funds in Chile support impactful medical initiatives that promote research, innovation, and community benefit. This recognition marks an important step forward in the project's growth and highlights the potential of digital tools to improve care delivery in Latin American settings.

We congratulate Dr. Retamales and his team on this well-deserved recognition, applaud his successful use of SEED funds, and look forward to following the progress of this inspiring project.

INTRODUCING A NEW SLAI INVESTIGATOR: DR. HUMBERTO MARTÍNEZ

Dr. Humberto Martínez of the Instituto Nacional de Cancerología (INC) joined SWOG less than a year ago and has already made a significant impact. A hematologic oncologist specializing in myeloma, T-cell therapies, and bone marrow transplants, he recently assumed the role of director of the newly established Immuno Cellular Therapy Committee at the INC.

He has quickly become a key voice for SLAI within the hematological cancer

committees and is actively advocating for his patients as well as increased participation from SLAI institutions in clinical trials with strong potential for accrual in Latin America. Pending appropriate network group approvals, Dr. Martínez plans to open studies EA4232, S2209, and S2308.



Dr. Martínez



NIA SPILOTRO'S SENIOR YEAR: FROM SLAI INTERN TO MED STUDENT

Nia Spilotro began her internship with the SLAI in autumn 2024.

During her second semester, she continued her work under the guidance of Dacia Christin, SLAI program manager, on developing PowerPoint slides and handouts for trainings, contributing to the improvement of infrastructure tracking tools and development of training materials including PowerPoint slides and handouts.

In this edition, she drafted an article based on Dr. Erika Ruiz's presentation on gastric cancer in Latin America (**see article on pg. 8**).

Nia recently graduated from Baylor University with her B.A. in medical humanities and B.S. in biochemistry, earning cum laude honors. She is moving on to attend the American Canadian School of Medicine in the Caribbean for medical school.

We are grateful for Nia's contributions to the program and hope her time with the SLAI has sparked a life-long commitment to clinical trials and research, with a global perspective!

INCAN SCALES UP: BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE TO CREATE MOMENTUM

In their first decade of participation in SWOG, the Instituto Nacional de Cancerología in Mexico (INCan, or the NCI in English) was often working on activation of one or two SWOG studies at a time—in the beginning, few protocols were available to sites outside of the US in SWOG and the National Clinical Trials Network (NCTN) in general. Despite this constraint, they accrued well to the trials they were allowed to participate on, earning multiple recognitions over the years on SWOG's top accruer list. Their achievements laid the foundation for a significant leap forward.

Recognizing the importance of aligning efforts with the NCTN and NCI Community Oncology Research Program (NCORP) network group research opportunities, Dr. Paula Cabera-Galeana, the SWOG principal investigator, has strategically focused on cancer protocols where ex-US participation is more feasible and where their institution has well-established investigator teams. Their primary focus areas, breast and genitourinary (GU) cancers, are not only where they have found the most traction within the NCTN but also represent some of the top cancer-related causes of mortality in Mexico

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(Globocan 2022). The team is also making a concerted effort to increase engagement in lymphoma studies, building on the strong capabilities of their hematology unit and leveraging regional disease prevalence to contribute meaningfully to lymphoma studies.

This strategic alignment has paid off. In recent years, they have dramatically increased their study activations. Current active protocols include S1703, S1802, S1827, S2212, and S2312. Studies currently in the activation pipeline are S2104, A022101, CCTG-PR26, EA8134, NRG-BR008, and NRG-BR009 (the latter might be activated by the time this goes to print!). Additionally, two studies—EA4232 and S2308—have been approved and are awaiting final protocol amendments before activation can begin. The coordinators also continue following patients on S1007 and S2010.

With this expanding NCTN research portfolio, Dr. Paula Cabrera, SWOG principal investigator at INCAN and president of the Society of Mexican Oncology, recognized the need to strengthen operational capacity. Under her leadership, the team has scaled their coordination infrastructure. Dr. Gabriela Mora (**see article on pg. 7**), who has played a critical role since the early days of SWOG in Mexico, is now supported by a newly expanded coordinating team with delineated roles and responsibilities. New SWOG staff at INCAN include Cindy Rodríguez (data capture), Dr. Berenice Carbajal (adaptation of protocols to local IRB-specific format), Dr. Fernando Cabrera (urology protocols), Dr. Ruben Rodriguez (registered

nurse), and Alan Hernández (breast protocols).

An innovative practice includes embedding a study coordinator in each tumor board meeting to proactively identify potential study candidates as soon as possible. The team also engages closely with their IRB to streamline approval processes and address concerns early, facilitating the path to study activation.

The GU team has made an outstanding entrance into SWOG. Their efforts on S1802, a prostate cancer study and their first study with the GU unit, have yielded 36 patient accruals to date. Their work earned them an award as a S1802 top accruer at the 2024 SWOG group meeting—an outstanding accomplishment for such a recently established SWOG research group at this institution.

Late-stage cancer diagnoses remain a significant challenge in Mexico, where many patients first present with late-stage cancers. This reality fuels the team's commitment to bringing clinical trials to underserved populations and advancing access to better treatments and care. With a flowing research pipeline, a strengthened operational team, and international recognition, this research team is poised to make a lasting impact in SWOG, the NCTN, and most importantly, with their patients!

Source: GLOBOCAN. *Cancer today: Mexico fact sheet*. International Agency for Research on Cancer; 2022. Available from: <https://gco.iarc.fr/today/data/factsheets/populations/484-mexico-fact-sheet.pdf> [Accessed 2025 Jul 3].



Dr. Paula Cabrera

With this expanding NCTN research portfolio, Dr. Paula Cabrera, SWOG principal investigator at INCAN and president of the Society of Mexican Oncology, recognized the need to strengthen operational capacity. Under her leadership, the team has scaled their coordination infrastructure.

**WANT TO
LEARN
MORE?**

Please sign into the SWOG website meeting page to view the recording of the full Latin America symposium held on Friday, May 2, at the spring 2025 group meeting: swog.org/spring-2025-group-meeting-recordings

SPOTLIGHT ON DR. GABRIELA MORA:

15 YEARS OF DEDICATION TO SWOG AT INCAN IN MEXICO

In this newsletter, we feature Dr. Gabriela Mora, lead oncology research professional at the Instituto Nacional de Cancerología in Mexico (INCan, or in English, the NCI). With 15 years of experience leading SWOG protocols, Gabriela has helped build one of the region's most robust SWOG research programs. INCan consistently ranks among the region's top-enrolling SWOG sites.

Gabriela began her career as a general physician and later worked over a decade in the pharmaceutical industry. In 2010, a colleague encouraged her to apply for a new role at INCan, the new SWOG institution, to help translate protocols, and set up study infrastructure. What she thought would be a temporary job became a long-term calling: "At first, I thought I'd help for a few months with translations. Five years later, I was still doing protocols, regulatory submissions, and everything else. It became my life's work."

Gabriela's work is far more comprehensive than traditional study coordination. She's involved in feasibility reviews, protocol translations, regulatory submissions, and patient screening. She has created custom tools at INCan to ensure protocol compliance.

Gabriela was once a one-woman site operation show, but with over 60 patients recruited to network group studies over the past 12 months, five active protocols, and seven protocols in the activation process, she supports other departments as INCan's SWOG operations team expands, and now works with a larger team of colleagues: "We're building a team, but the pace is still intense. Strong collaboration is key."

Although INCan is the most important institute for cancer care in Mexico, with teams of specialized, dedicated, and cutting-edge medical professionals, SWOG trials in Mexico



face complex challenges—drug importation, compliance with COFEPRIS (the national agency that has to approve many protocols and specimen exports), and lack of dedicated pharmacy staff.

Gabriela finds meaning in staying close to patients. Many reach out directly with concerns, and she's often their first call, even outside working hours. "Our patients sometimes feel lost in a big hospital. I tell them: if you have a question, call me. It's rewarding to be that support." It is not unheard of for Gabriela to take calls in the middle of the night or weekends (should we be concerned that she misses being on call as a clinician too much?).

Gabriela strongly advocates for having one dedicated SWOG coordinator per site and more Spanish-language training resources tailored to real workflows. "SWOG protocols aren't like others. Coordinators need specialized knowledge. It's a different world." She hopes future training includes practical insights from U.S. teams that can be scaled to Latin American settings with limited resources.

Gabriela lives in Mexico City with her sister, niece, and five lively dogs. Weekends are spent in Cuernavaca, tending her uncle's garden and enjoying a slower pace.

"Even when I'm running in all directions, I love what I do. SWOG has given me a purpose, and I'm proud of what we've built."



Dr. Gabriela Mora

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EXPLORING GLOBAL GASTRIC CANCER DISPARITIES: INSIGHTS FROM THE LEGACY STUDY

At the 2025 spring SLAI symposium, Dr. Erika Ruiz, education committee chair at the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) and leading investigator at the Instituto Nacional de Cancerología in Mexico, presented research exploring the molecular underpinnings of gastrointestinal (GI) cancers in Latin America. The focus: gastric adenocarcinoma, one of the most common and burdensome GI malignancies in the region.

While gastric cancer has been extensively studied in populations across Asia, Europe, and the United States, Latin American groups have historically been underrepresented in genomic and immunologic research. This has created a blind spot in understanding disease progression, treatment response, and prognosis for Latin America, whose population experiences disproportionately high incidence rates.

To address this, the LEGACY study, funded through the European Union's Horizon 2020 program, was born in 2018. It represented a prospective, cross-continental effort to compare gastric cancer biology between Latin America and Europe.

The LEGACY study enrolled patients from eight countries: Mexico, Argentina, Chile, and Paraguay on the Latin American side, and Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, and Portugal on the European side. Tumor tissue, adjacent skin samples, blood, urine, nail clippings, and epidemiological data were collected across sites, offering a rich, multi-omic view of the disease landscape.

Several important differences emerged:

- A higher prevalence of Epstein-Barr virus (EBV)+ tumors was seen in Chilean patients (19%)—suggesting that immunotherapy may be especially effective in this group.
- Stronger immune responses to

infection were generally observed in Latin American samples compared to European ones.

- HER2+ gastric cancers were more common among European patients.
- PD-L1 CPS and KI67 marker expression varied markedly: PD-L1 CPS scores expression was higher in Latin America (15 vs. 3), and KI67-positive cells were also more common (83% vs. 72%).

These differences point to the urgent need for context-specific clinical trials and the reevaluation of one-size-fits-all treatment models.

LEGACY's innovation extended beyond genetic sequencing:

- In the Netherlands, investigators conducted immune profiling using Nanostring technology, analyzing over 600 immune-related genes. Mexican patients showed a predominance of Cluster 2, an inflammatory subtype linked to pathways such as JAK-STAT, MAPK, and Hedgehog signaling.
- Portuguese researchers performed a microbiome analysis, highlighting the role of local gut flora in modulating immune behavior.

Of particular note was the role of *Helicobacter pylori* (HP). While HP infection is widely associated with immune activation in GI cancers, this correlation broke down in the Mexican cohort. Instead, high HP prevalence coupled with abundant



Dr. Erika Ruiz

T-cells was linked to a lack of effective antigen presentation—suggesting that immune checkpoint inhibitors may be less effective in this population, and that antimicrobial-targeted approaches may be more beneficial.

The LEGACY study illustrates the profound value of international collaboration in uncovering population-specific drivers of disease. The findings emphasize that tailored therapies, rooted in local biology, are essential to improving outcomes for gastric cancer patients—both in Latin America and beyond.

As Dr. Ruiz concluded, “If we hope to close the cancer equity gap, we must understand how cancer behaves not just in the lab—but in every corner of the world where it's fought.”

Source: Dienstmann R, Ruiz-García E, Alsina M, Ruiz-Pace F, Groen-van Schooten TS, Martínez-Ciarpaglini C, Fernández-Figueroa EA, et al. Integrated clinico-molecular analysis of gastric cancer in European and Latin American populations: LEGACY project. ESMO Open. Mar;10(3):104482.