Hill will move mountains to ease pain of cancer

Jill Mango

The Australian who has just taken leadership of the largest and most influential cancer organisation has one overriding passion — to reduce the pain of cancer.

Last night, at the World Cancer Congress in Geneva, the quietly spoken David Hill was elected president of the International Union Against Cancer (UICC).

He plans to use his two-year presidency to build infrastructure to deliver pain relief to those suffering from cancer in poor countries. People in these countries often have strong family and community support during their illness but, because no medication is available, little can be done to alleviate their pain.

Hill’s colleagues say that if anyone could improve this situation, it is him.

As a behavioural scientist, a professorial fellow at the University of Melbourne and director of the Cancer Council of Victoria, Hill is known as an innovator with a formidable ability to achieve change.

Seven million people die of cancer across the globe every year and, while most can’t afford chemotherapy and other expensive treatments, he says they could have painkillers, which are cheap to produce and administer.

“The police mentality of keeping illicit drugs unavailable is achieved at the expense of the beneficent and proper use of them,” Hill says.

Hill, who began contributing to the UICC more than 30 years ago, has many runs on the board. When he talks about pain control, people will be listening, says Tony Burgess, professor and Australian director of the global Ludwig Institute for Cancer Research.

“He can make a change throughout many developing countries and bring relief to tens of thousands of people.”

Burgess describes Hill as “very quiet but effective and dogged, absolutely determined to make a difference”.

“He will bring a rich experience in behavioural biology to help the UICC get its message across. His background is studying how to introduce new concepts to politicians... and he has a terrific track record.”

Pain control is one of nine global targets set by the UICC and Hill will

THE UICC

The International Union Against Cancer (UICC) reaches into every aspect of cancer medicine. By drawing on its membership, it can obtain the most expert opinion available in the world through one phone call, at no cost.

Its aim is to focus on transforming the latest knowledge into strategies that countries and communities can use to reduce cancer.

From 100 member countries it has 300 member organisations, ranging from the powerful American Cancer Society to the small Fiji Cancer Society. Countries that can’t afford their subscriptions are helped by wealthy members.

Australia pays for up to six small countries in the region.

form a taskforce quickly to get action on these targets.

His challenge will be to keep the tobacco binda heard in a world where the big three agendas of climate change, food shortage and security each have a loud voice.

Rather than compete with these, Hill’s strategy is to position cancer with them. This could, for example, see tobacco plants replaced with food crops on good agricultural land.

He says cancer has two distinctive advantages over the big agendas. First, it has solutions, which means implementing them is a matter of organisation, political will and international co-operation.

Second, it does not bring the interests of sovereign states into conflict, which usually paralyses action.

Hill, the second Australian to become president of the UICC in 75 years, follows in the distinguished footsteps of fellow Victorian Nigel Gray.

A pioneer of cancer prevention, Gray is credited with altering the world’s attitude to smoking. He influenced the UICC and, through it, shifted the global perception of tobacco.

Gray was director of the then Anti-Cancer Council of Victoria for more than 25 years and, during the prolonged tobacco battle, Hill served as one of his warriors.

Now Hill is chief and Gray says the idea on pain control is “simple, cheap and timely” — and not dangerous, which is very important in developing countries.

“David is a good organiser and is extremely creative, with a useful depth of rat cunning. This is an idea that will sell. It is something that will be perceived as possible,” Gray says.

Ian Olver, professor and CEO of the Cancer Council Australia, believes Hill will be able to translate the successful strategies used in Victoria to the international stage. “We all look forward to supporting him in that role. There is enormous potential to improve cancer outcomes globally.”

While president, Hill will continue to work in Australia, where he has spent more than 40 years in cancer control and has been the driving force behind many successful social marketing campaigns, particularly to promote sun protection and quitting smoking.

“ITook the Cancer Council some time before it realised what a gem they had in him,” says Rob Moodie, professor of global health at the University of Melbourne’s Nossal Institute. “He’s a humble but incredibly effective leader.”

Australia’s most eminent cancer figure, Tom Reeve, emeritus professor, now at the Australian Cancer Network, says Hill’s considered opinion is frequently sought. “He’s a quiet, thoughtful, friendly man who is highly regarded for his understanding of the place of cancer in the local psyche.”

While Hill will be aiming for international targets, he will also be reaching for local ones by trying to improve cancer survival rates in Victoria.

In Australia today, 64 per cent of women and 58 per cent of men are alive five years after their cancer diagnosis. But in Victoria, Hill is aiming for 74 per cent overall survival by 2015.

“Improvements are happening all the time so even if we did not do anything new it would go on getting better — but this target, set by the Premier, puts the bar higher,” he says.

“The single thing that would make the biggest impact in this time frame would be fully implementing the bowel cancer screening program, starting over 50. That’s the best buy in (terms of) quick return for preventing cancer deaths at the moment.”