

‘50 for 50’: A celebration of 50 years of cancer research at the International Agency for Research on Cancer global conference in Lyon, France

To the Editor: Cancer affects all humankind, and its incidence continues on an upward trajectory. Its impact cuts across country borders, ethnic groups, religions and economic status, with more than 8 million deaths attributed to cancer in 2013.^[1] High-resource countries continue to carry the highest cancer incidence rates (Fig. 1), but they also provide the best treatment, diagnosis and detection. The disease burden on low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) has been severe, with more than 60% of the world’s cancer cases occurring in Central and South America, Asia and Africa. In total, these regions account for about 70% of cancer deaths (Fig. 2).^[2] A similar scenario plays out in South Africa, with more than 77 000 new cancer cases being reported in 2012.^[3]

The Global Cancer Conference 2016 and ‘50 for 50’ initiative

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) was founded on 20 May 1965.^[2] For the past 50 years, the IARC has served as the specialised cancer research unit of the World Health Organization. The IARC strives to promote international collaboration in cancer research.^[5]

Celebrating the 50th year of its existence, the IARC held a conference in Lyon on 7 - 10 June 2016, where almost 1 000 scientists from across the globe came together to discuss today’s cancer-related challenges and tomorrow’s agenda for cancer prevention.^[6] The programme was characterised by distinguished speakers, including Freddie Bray and Graham Colditz. There were themed parallel sessions on ‘epidemiology’, ‘mechanisms’ and ‘prevention and mortality reduction’ and panel debates and more than 300 posters were presented.

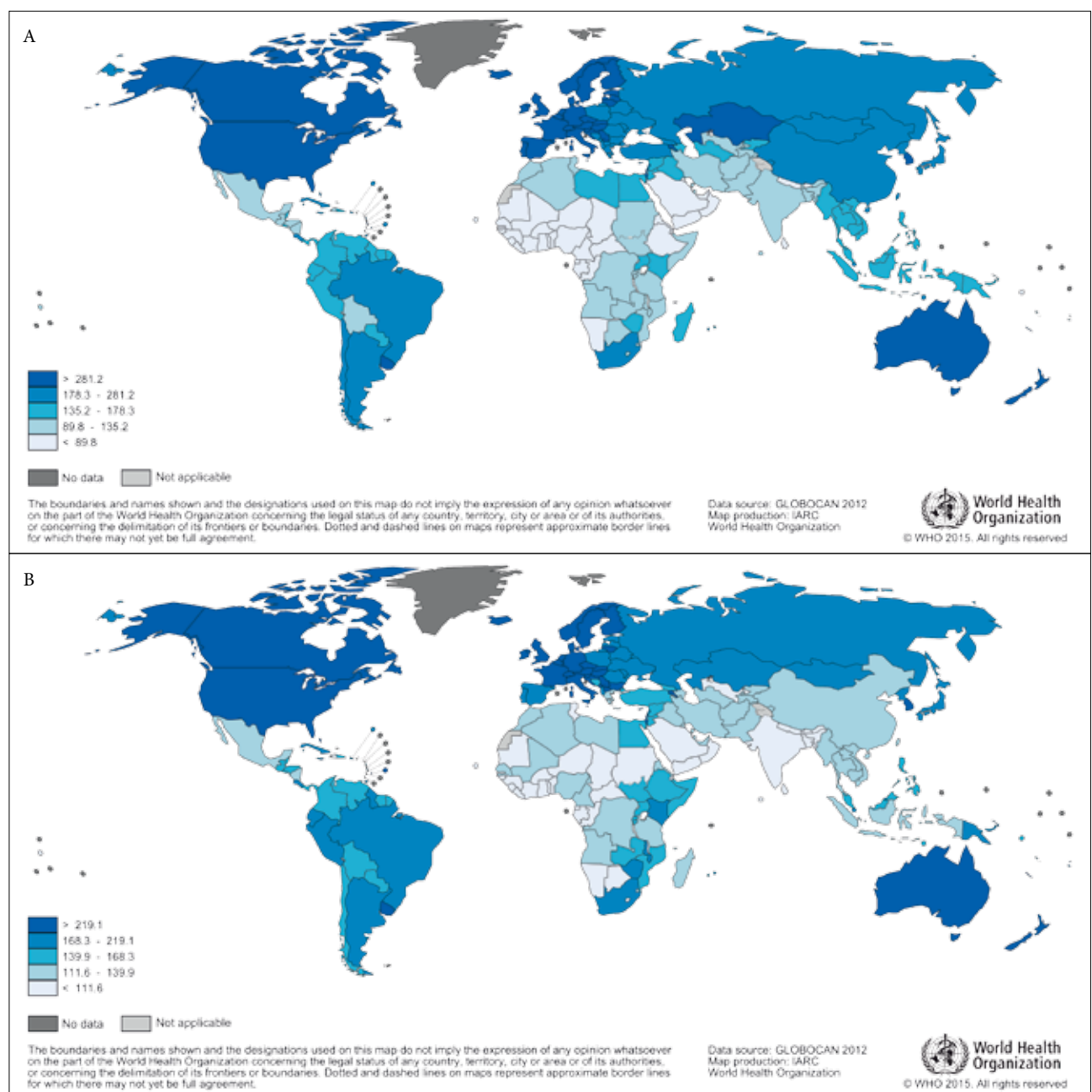


Fig. 1. Global distribution of estimated age-standardised (world) cancer incidence rates per 100 000, for all sites combined (excluding non-melanoma skin cancer) in (A) men and (B) women, 2012^[4] (reproduced with permission from the IARC).

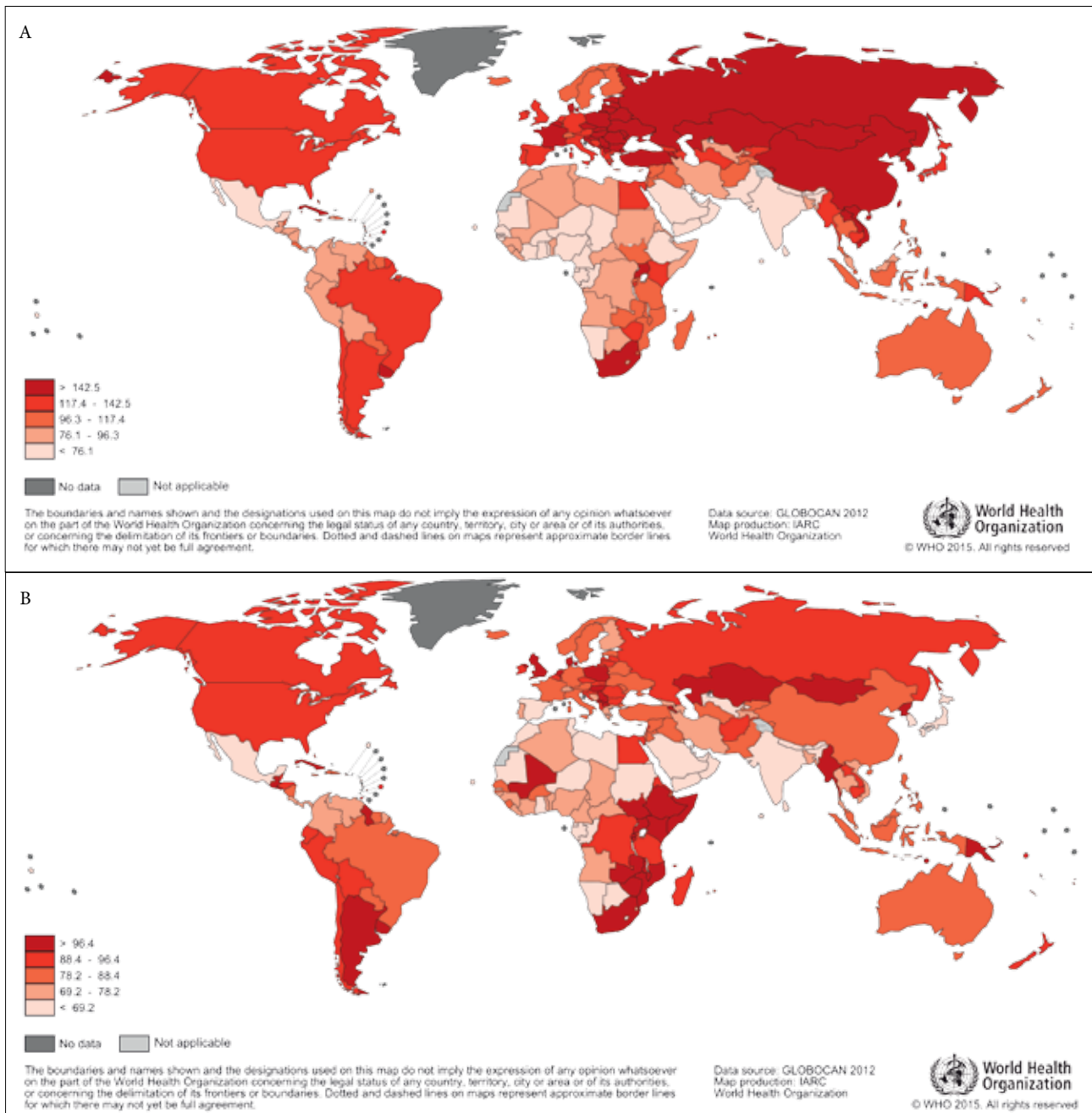


Fig. 2. Global distribution of estimated age-standardised (world) cancer mortality rates per 100 000, for all sites combined (excluding non-melanoma skin cancer) in (A) men and (B) women, 2012⁽⁴⁾ (reproduced with permission from the IARC).

Embedded in this celebration, the IARC hosted the '50 for 50' initiative. Fifty future cancer research leaders from 40 LMICs were identified, one for each year of the agency's existence. The IARC enabled these researchers to participate in a specialised, 2-day preconference workshop (entitled Fostering Leadership in Cancer Research) and to attend the conference on Global Cancer: Occurrence, Causes, and Avenues to Prevention.

Fostering of leadership in cancer research was undertaken through four highly interactive sessions on: (i) infrastructure needs for a cancer research group/institution/centre; (ii) networking in research; (iii) safeguarding the integrity of research and research participants; and (iv) funding. Modules were presented by a dynamic IARC team and opportunities to meet IARC scientists were created. IARC director Christopher Wild engaged regularly with the group. During

the conference, Lynette Denny (University of Cape Town) was a recipient of the 2016 IARC Medal of Honour for her research on cervical cancer in Africa. There was a special session on the social determinants of health, led by Prof. Sir Michael Marmot.

We learned that the burden of cancer is expected to double over the next 20 years. Young cancer researchers have an important role to play, and we believe that we are up for the challenge.

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