

JOURNAL

of Health Inequalities

“My greatest dream is to build a Radium Institute in Warsaw”

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ABSTRACT

Maria Skłodowska-Curie belongs to the group of the world's most prominent scientists. She is remembered as the winner of two Nobel Prizes, in physics and in chemistry, and the discoverer of radium and pioneer of research on radioactivity, together with her husband Pierre Curie. However, her heroic efforts undertaken to create a network of scientific institutions working to solve the mystery of cancer and towards the eradication of the disease, deserve more attention. Already a century ago Maria Skłodowska-Curie believed that one of the most important challenges facing humanity is the development of methods of effective cancer control. She dedicated the last part of her life creating a network of Radium Institutes around the world. She also fulfilled her personal lifelong dream of establishing one of the first such institutions in her beloved Warsaw. Established in 1932, the Polish Radium Institute became a hub of cancer control in Poland and globally.

KEY WORDS: Maria Skłodowska-Curie, radium institute, cancer in Poland.

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Maria Skłodowska-Curie was one of the greatest Polish scientists and patriots. Born in a modest family in an enslaved country, she spent her life not only pursuing her scientific dreams and discoveries, but also fighting for Poland's recognition in the world (Fig. 1).

Her life was marked by periods of great happiness interlaced with troubles and misfortune. She found her intellectual kindred soul in Pierre Curie, together with whom she made some of her most important discoveries (Fig. 2). She named the first radioactive element she discovered Polonium, in a tribute to her country of birth. However, it was her second discovery, that of Radium, which constituted the real breakthrough in nuclear physics. Unfortunately, Pierre Curie died a premature, tragic death. She lived a modest life, left alone to face the challenges of being an emigrant, female scientist in the early 20th century. The value of her work was constantly questioned by the jealous, patriarchal society in which she lived. However, her further research spoke for itself and ultimately only confirmed her genius. Unfortunately,

she was a victim of her own work, as radiation led to her untimely death.

Maria Skłodowska-Curie was one of the founders of broadly understood oncology in Poland. In 1932 she established the Radium Institute in Warsaw, one of the first institutions of this type in the world (Figs. 3, 4). The creation of the Institute was the result of a nationwide effort, as money came from public donations. The building process was overseen by Maria's sister, Dr. Bronisława Dłuska, who became the first director of the Institute.

The Radium Institute became not just a hospital treating cancer, but a hub coordinating the development of oncology in Poland. Its successor, the Maria Skłodowska-Curie Institute of Oncology in Warsaw has been leading cancer control in Poland for more than 80 years (1932–2017). In the early 1950s it created one of the first cancer registries in the world. In the 1980s the cancer epidemiology and prevention division was opened. Since then, the Institute has conducted a comprehensive programme of fighting lung cancer via tobacco control [1].

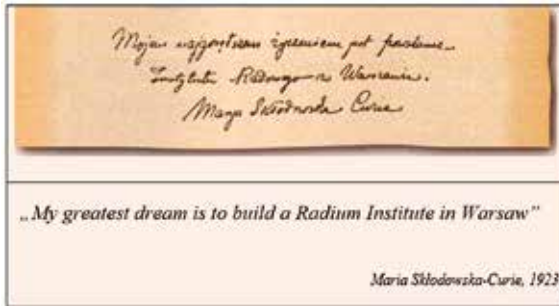


FIG. 1. Maria Skłodowska-Curie's handwritten note

In the years 2006-2016 Maria Skłodowska-Curie Institute realised National Cancer Control Programme in Poland. I had the privilege, together with my colleagues (Professor Jan Steffen, Andrzej Kułakowski, Marek Nowacki and Janusz Meder) to be a co-author and executor of this programme. It constituted one of Poland's greatest public health achievements after the collapse of communism, and in the early 2000s the WHO called it "an example to the rest of world".

I am proud to have been able to contribute to this great legacy launched by Maria Skłodowska-Curie. After working for almost 15 years (1965-1979) as a medical practitioner in the Medical University in Wrocław, I had the honour to be for nearly 40 years (1979-2016) the Director of Epidemiology and Cancer Prevention Division of the Maria Skłodowska-Curie Institute.

In the last decades substantial progress in cancer control in Poland was made. The first of its main achievements was the decline in lung cancer. Since the beginning of 1990s Poland experienced one of the fastest declines in lung cancer rates in the world – lung cancer morbidity was halved between 1990 and 2015 (see *Lung cancer mortality decline among middle-aged men and women in Poland and comparison with UK*, pp. 123-126). The second achievement of the Programme is the progress in cervical cancer secondary prevention, which in the last decades has been steadily declining in Poland [2], in contrast to other countries of the region such as Latvia [3].

Summing up: Already a century ago the brilliant Pole Maria Skłodowska-Curie believed that one of the most important challenges facing humanity is solving the mystery of cancer and developing methods of effectively controlling it. She understood that this can only be achieved through science. She dedicated the last part of her life (1867-1934) creating a network of Radium Institutes around the world. She fulfilled her lifelong dream of establishing one of the first such institutions in her beloved Warsaw. Established in 1932, it became the hub of cancer control in Poland. I had the great honour of working there in the years 1979-2016.

DISCLOSURE

Authors report no conflict of interest.

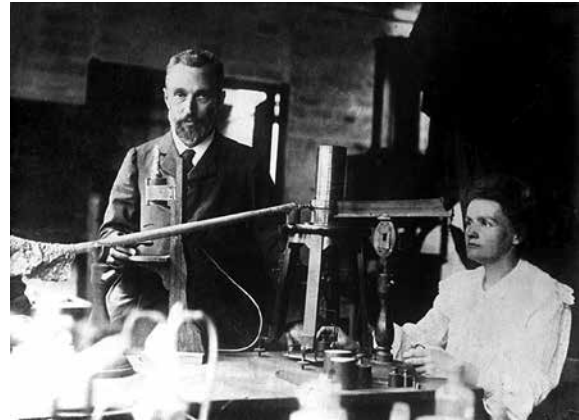


FIG. 2. Maria Skłodowska-Curie and her husband Pierre Curie in the laboratory



FIG. 3. Radium Institute in Warsaw, Poland



FIG. 4. Monument of Maria Skłodowska-Curie at the Cancer Center and Institute of Oncology, Warsaw, Poland

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