

Press Release 6th Alliance Against Arthritis (AAA)

Rheumatic Diseases: An Increasing Challenge to European Economies

EULAR Launches Work Charter

Brussels, 3 March 2009

EULAR adopts its Work Charter and brings together EU policy makers and experts in endorsing it on the occasion of the 6th *Alliance Against Arthritis Day* in Brussels

On the occasion of the 6th European *Alliance Against Arthritis Day* (AAA), Europe's umbrella organisation of national societies of rheumatology and patients' organisations – The European League against Rheumatism (EULAR) - calls on the European Commission and Council as well as the European governments and social partners to recognise and enforce the employment rights of people with rheumatic diseases in Europe.

The AAA started off today with a debate in the European Parliament, involving high level policy makers and experts. Participants addressed responsibilities and capabilities of the European Union for better integration of millions of people with a rheumatic disease into work life. The economical and social burden of arthritis and rheumatism not only on patients, but also on society was emphasised by various speakers. Members of the European Parliament called on the European Commission and the Council to give higher priority to rheumatic diseases in future policies, including research policies.

The subsequent debate titled "Healthcare and Employment – Ideas for a New Policy Approach" brought up a plethora of recommendations and comments on how to bring flexibility to the work environment for the one suffering of chronic diseases. The closing of today's AAA events was marked by the launching of the 'Charter For Work' on rheumatic diseases.

Professor Ferdinand C. Breedveld, EULAR president, welcomed the EULAR Work Charter and stated: "By adopting the 'Charter For Work' EULAR calls on policy makers in the European Union to become more proactive in enforcing and facilitating employment for all Europeans with rheumatic diseases." He added that: "the right to work and not be discriminated is not

only a necessity for a dignified way of life but a legal obligation of employers and policy makers such as it is mentioned in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”.

The charter calls for greater public awareness and recognition of the competences and potential of the people affected. Among the proposals in the Charter are tax incentives for employers, part time work, job share schemes and the promotion of flexible working conditions as means of achieving adequate employment prospects for Europeans with arthritis/rheumatism. It is also stressed that early diagnosis and access to proper treatment is crucial on enabling retention of jobs and return to the workforce.

Background

Rheumatic diseases affect almost one-quarter of all Europeans (more than 100 million) chronically. These people have impaired quality of life, various degrees of disability and often premature death. Rheumatic diseases elicit the highest costs to European health care and socioeconomic systems. In Europe alone, due to health care costs, work-disability and premature retirement, rheumatic diseases impose an economic burden of more than 200 billion Euros per year. In addition to the financial and social burdens, the diseases are expected to grow immensely due to the ageing population in Europe and the chronic character.

The key challenges that countries of the European Union are facing with respect to policy making are low employment rates among the people concerned but also a high dependency on benefits, high and increasing public spending on sickness and/or disability benefits as well as an increased poverty risk among those with disabilities.

The demographic trends and the resulting shrinking of the labour force in the future emphasize the importance of shifting from "passive" compensation system to an active integration programmes, allowing to make best use of the available workforce. People with chronic diseases and disabilities can represent a significant addition to the labour force and thus contribute to economic production. Currently, their potential is underused. The overall decrease in Europe's population will make the economy increasingly dependent on skilled people - even if they have chronic diseases like arthritis/rheumatism.

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About AAA

The AAA (*Alliance Against Arthritis*) was initiated by EULAR in 2004. It aims to improve the prospects for people with arthritis by an increase in funding for rheumatology research and improvement of European disability legislation, and to promote activities towards an awareness of the rheumatic diseases and today's therapeutic possibilities – on a national and European level.

About EULAR

The European League Against Rheumatism (EULAR) is the European umbrella organisation of national societies of rheumatology and patients' organisations. It aims to stimulate, promote and support research, prevention, treatment and rehabilitation of rheumatic diseases. Founded in 1947, it currently represents health professionals from 43 scientific organisations and 31 social leagues and patient organisations throughout Europe and thus, stands for a united representation of research and patient needs in the field of musculoskeletal diseases.

For more information about EULAR please visit: www.eular.org, www.worldarthritisday.org