

ESCIR report 2007- 2008

Lars Klareskog

The aims of ESCIR are to enhance use of experimental rheumatology in research aimed at developing better prevention and cure for rheumatic patients in Europe and elsewhere. The means have so far mainly been the establishment of contacts and exchange of knowledge within these areas via ESCIR, and subcommittees of ESCIR.

The need for expanded strategies has been discussed among ESCIR members during the year since the 2007 Eular Congress. We have concluded that the need for European collaborations in experimental rheumatology is emerging with the expanding potentials of genetics and other methodologies that permit analysis of origins, prognosis and outcomes of rheumatic diseases. Many of these studies have to be performed using large groups of patients, something that needs international collaboration. This is the case for all diseases, but special needs exist for rare diseases.

There are also expanding needs for studies aimed at evaluating modes of action of therapies that are in development in humans and of close links such human studies and studies on experimental animals.

We have concluded that new initiatives from EULAR and ESCIR are needed within a number of these areas, and that several of these areas are overlapping with areas where other standing EULAR committees are active, in particular the Standing committee for epidemiology and the standing committee for Clinical trials.

We have also concluded that we need to use the emerging EU funding for European projects in rheumatology, and that such programs are those that can provide major resources for development of the collaborations that are the goals of ESCIR.

In order to implement programs that would meet the objectives set up from these discussions, there are needs for both short term strengthening of ongoing activities in those study groups that exist and use of the same subgroup structure to start new subgroups in relevant areas. The efforts in this field are summarised below. But there is also a need for a wider and more comprehensive strategy, which combines efforts from different standing committee, regarding use of new technologies for research in ethiology, prognosis and therapy of many different rheumatic diseases. Here, conclusions from the discussions within ESCIR will be fed into the general strategy discussions that are currently taking place in EULAR, rather than being implemented as separate ESCIR initiatives.

Meetings during the year:

One committee meeting and one open “report from ESCIR” were conducted during the EULAR 2007 congress. The open meeting was concerned with the description of impacts of new technologies within genetics, proteomics and bioinformatics for rheumatology, with a number of very well renowned speakers. This meeting provided a very good basis for the further discussions within ESCIR on what new joint European work that will be needed to use these technologies on a European scale.

One committee meeting was held during the EWRR meeting in Toulouse. This meeting was held in parallel with several meetings in ESCIR study groups. Overall, the activity in the subgroups has the same or increasing activity as compared with previous years

Collaborations between ESCIR, other standing committee and European EU funded programs have been initiated. One important line of development is to develop common knowledge about rules for exchange of patient information and biological materials, in particular DNA between groups in different countries in Europe. Two programs in this mode have been initiated in collaboration with the EU FP6 funded program AutoCure: The Rheumatology Unit in Manchester has received AutoCure funding for collecting DNA from patients with RA and myositis from many different countries in Europe and provide basic genotyping facility and data sharing. Karolinska Institutet has initiated a program within bioethics and in particular bioethics of biobank work.

Membership in ESCIR

With the help from the Eular secretariat, letters have been sent to all Eular scientific organisations in order to update and renew membership of ESCIR. Several new members have been welcomed, and some of them participated in the Toulouse ESCIR committee meeting. We hope that this will contribute to making ESCIR activities useful also in countries which have not been so active in ESCIR during previous years.

Ongoing and new work within the subgroup structure of ESCIR

Autoantibody study group: This study group is the most established and also the most active of the ESCIR groups. This years ESCIR meeting during EWRR was led by Ruud Smeenk, and about 40 scientists attended a very active workshop related to standardisation of mainly scleroderma related sera. This group is now funded from Eular for an additional three years and is very active.

The synovitis study group. This group is led by Paul Peter Tak, and is coordinating arthroscopy courses and development together with evaluations of synovial biopsies. The group continues to be very active, with a more limited number of members. Plans exist and are under development for establishing more centers for arthroscopy in new parts of Europe, and we expect applications for funding from Eular from this group for such efforts. This group is currently expanding its activities to many new countries via the synoviomics program led by Paul Peter Tak.

Genomics study group: This group has to a large extent carried out its work in collaboration with the EU funded AutoCure project. The intention is to keep workshops open to both AutoCure and other Eular members, and to make certain resources created by AutoCure available to all Eular members. One such initiative is the one initiated in January 2008 from AutoCure and Jane Worthington, Manchester, concerning a European collection of DNA samples from arthritis and myositis to be collected, and genotyped in a centralised fashion (initially at Manchester) and data on genotypes be brought back to each unit for local as well as jointly performed further research.

Gene therapy group: This group, led by Christina Jorgensen, Montpellier is concerned with development of gene therapy. So far most research has been carried out in experimental animals, but the work is increasingly translational. A network has been established in Europe with the help of several different EU funded projects (including Genostem and AutoCure) and this program can serve as a basis for future research as well as joint applications (o EU and other sources)

Bioethics: A discussion has been going on jointly between ESCIR and the epidemiology group led by Alan Silman concerning efforts to learn more about current rules for

exchange and use of biological materials and data bases in Europe, and ways to change and modify these rules so that they provide the best and most balanced benefit for our patients. Initiatives need to be taken within this group.

Immunoendocrinology: This is a group under development under lead from Maurizio Cutolo, which did not have the possibility to meet during recent EWRR.

Activities planned for enhancing use of biologic materials in collaborative clinical research in Europe

A new applications procedure is currently being developed for Eular grants. ESCIR want to be an early participant in this work. A form has been developed that is suitable for ESCIR work, and has been made according to general recommendations in Eular and based on the work successfully performed in ESCISIT.

“Grants from Eular for work within experimental rheumatology should be coordinated via the Standing Committee for Investigative Rheumatology (ESCIR)”. This means that all applications should be submitted to ESCIR (via the chairman) at least 6 weeks before a Eular executive meeting. The proposal will initially be scrutinised by three members from ESCIR (the present, former and upcoming chairpersons). These three members may ask external experts for advice. Decisions will be taken by the Eular executive after advice from the ESCIR committee chairs.

Applications should be aimed to enhance European collaboration within the area of Experimental rheumatology, and they should be directed towards the fulfilment of the general strategic goals of Eular. They can be aimed at developing new standards for collection and storing of biological materials (taking international general recommendations into account), they can be related to specific efforts to practically collect materials. They can be within development of standards for experimental models for rheumatic diseases etc. No single research projects performed by single groups or limited number of groups will normally be funded.