

Press Release

Strasbourg, 28 September 2005

European Parliament urges Council and Commission to make the fight against rheumatic diseases an explicit health priority

Written declaration on rheumatic diseases gathers overwhelming support of the European parliamentarians

A written declaration calling on the EU decision-makers to recognise the extraordinary burden of rheumatic diseases, was adopted as an official resolution of the European Parliament today, after it had been signed by more than 380 of its Members from all EU Member States and political groups.

The broad cross-party initiative urges the European Commission and the Council to make rheumatic diseases, which currently affect more than 100 million of people in Europe and cause severe damage to the EU economies, a priority in the EU's 7th Research Framework Programme and its future health strategy.

The European Parliament's resolution constitutes a strong reaction towards the European Commission for having overlooked one of Europe's most common health threats. Commenting on the success of the written declaration, Richard Howitt, one of the members who submitted it, said: "I am delighted that the declaration on arthritis has received overwhelming support from my colleagues in parliament. As the second most common reason for consulting a doctor, it is incredible that it is not up there with the feared and funded illnesses that we are all so familiar with. If one in four people have arthritis, nearly 200 Members of the Parliament are likely to be sufferers. Their support is a reflection of just how many people's lives are blighted by this crippling disease."

The resolution is going to be forwarded to the Council and the Commission. They are asked to incorporate the request of the Parliament in the preparation of the future European research funding programme by explicitly recognising them as 'major diseases' like cancer, cardiovascular diseases or diabetes/obesity, and in the new Health and Consumer Programme.

Over 100 million people of all ages suffer from a rheumatic disease at some point in their lives. This figure is set to rise in the next decades in an ageing society causing enormous costs to European health and social systems.

Prof. Tore Kvien, President of the *European League Against Rheumatism (EULAR)* welcomed the adoption of the written declaration and underlined:

EULAR

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“Rheumatic diseases are the single most costly group of disorders, if measured in terms of hospital costs, medication costs, rehabilitation costs and costs of lost days at work. The EU should become aware of these alarming figures and react accordingly”. Robert Johnstone, President of *Arthritis and Rheumatism International (ARi)*, who has had rheumatoid arthritis since the age of 3, said: “The resolution of the European Parliament is a very optimistic signal for all people in Europe suffering from different forms of arthritis and rheumatism. These conditions have a dramatic impact on quality of life and the ability to enjoy a full and useful role in society.” Prof. Josef Smolen, past President of EULAR, added: “We are grateful to the Members of the European Parliament for their overwhelming recognition of the importance of the fight against rheumatic diseases and hope that the European Commission, together with the European Parliament and the Council, will do its utmost to bring the requests of the declaration into reality.”

Rheumatic diseases are the single major cause of early retirement due to disability and sick-leaves in many EU-countries accounting for about 450 million days of sick leave in Europe per year. Their overall impact leads to losses of app. 2 per cent of GNP each year.

The Written Declaration on Rheumatic Diseases was launched on 5 July by Richard Howitt (UK), Adamos Adamou (Cyprus), David Hammerstein (Spain), Ursula Stenzel (Austria) and Grażyna Staniszevska (Poland).

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 30 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.

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