

## **EU Presidency focuses on rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases**

### **Member States and stakeholder organisations present recommendations at EU Presidency conferences in Brussels**

Brussels, 20 October 2010

**On 19 and 20 October 2010, experts from academia, scientific societies, patient organisations, Member States' government and social security institutions as well as EU bodies agreed upon a number of key policy recommendations for improving the management and prevention of rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases. This set of recommendations, and specific initiatives for their implementation, were the main outcomes of the EU Presidency Conference on Rheumatic and Musculoskeletal Diseases, organised in collaboration with EULAR, the European League Against Rheumatism. The recommendations embraced six areas of intervention: rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases as a priority on health policy agendas; rights of patients to quality healthcare and to full inclusion in economic and social life; early prevention and referral; evidence-based treatment and standards of care; patient involvement in the design, implementation and evaluation of healthcare services; and increased research funding. Conference recommendations culminated in the call for an EU Musculoskeletal Disease Strategy and national action plans.**

Consensus was reached among participants concerning recognition of the socioeconomic importance of rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases and the need for prioritising rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases on health policy agendas. As EULAR President Prof. Paul Emery stated, "rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases should be recognised as one of the most important public health challenges, given the enormous burden of these disorders on individuals' lives, the social and health systems, and thereby the whole economy".

Olivier Belle, Member of the Cabinet of Laurette Onkelinx, Belgian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Social Affairs and Health, said: "People affected by musculoskeletal diseases and their families face micro-challenges every day, due to their conditions. When we have 120 million micro-challenges, it becomes a political challenge. The Belgian Presidency of the EU acknowledges the importance of these conditions in Europe and is committed to addressing the issue politically".

The conference underlined the importance of active patient involvement. Access to health care services and full inclusion in society were recognised as entitlements of citizens with such disorders. However, as several speakers pointed out, much effort is still needed to guarantee equal access to treatment as well as integration into the labour market. Employers were called upon to allow for adaptations of work environments and working conditions. Such flexibility at work places would enable people to stay in work or return to work instead of being excluded.

Delegates also made the case for concrete actions on prevention. The impact of musculoskeletal diseases could in many cases be limited if people affected by them benefited from early referral and

early diagnosis. Well trained general practitioners and specialists as well as a sufficient number of specialised centres, were mentioned as key elements to serve this purpose.

According to participants, EU institutions and Member States should guarantee that the management of chronic diseases, and particularly rheumatic and musculoskeletal conditions, is organised in accordance with evidence-based recommendations. Moreover, standards of care should be further developed and implemented across Europe.

Special attention was given to the role of patients in both prevention and management of musculoskeletal diseases. It was emphasised that patients should be more involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of healthcare services, and that new forms of doctor/patient partnerships should be developed. Neil Betteridge, EULAR Vice President PARE (People with Arthritis/Rheumatism in Europe), said: “The involvement of patients represents benefits in two different ways: First, it promotes self-management and self-sufficiency, which are essential for coping with our own diseases. Second, as we are experts in living with these conditions, we can make a significant contribution in designing and evaluating preventive initiatives and treatments”.

Delegates also recognised the need for a stronger commitment of both Member States and EU institutions to support and fund basic and applied research in this area. It was stressed that it is not only important to improve knowledge on the determinants of these disorders, but also knowledge and technologies in the fields of prevention and treatment.

EULAR President Prof. Emery presented the conference recommendations at the Ministerial Conference “Innovative Approaches for Chronic Illnesses in Public Health and Healthcare Systems”, organised by the Belgian EU Presidency on 20 October. Summarising the two days, Prof. Emery declared: “Our community is very satisfied with the results of these two conferences. We can see that Europe is finally recognising the dimension and impact of musculoskeletal disorders. All actors should now work together to implement the excellent ideas exchanged here into daily practice.”

Full text of the Conference Recommendations can be obtained from the EULAR Brussels Office (see address below).

#### **About musculoskeletal diseases:**

Chronic rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases affect almost one-quarter of all Europeans (more than 100 million). These people have impaired quality of life, various degrees of disability and often premature death. Rheumatic diseases elicit the highest costs to health care and social systems. In Europe alone, due to health care costs, work-disability, sick leave and premature retirement, rheumatic diseases impose an economic burden of more than € 240 billion per year on state budgets. The impact of these diseases is expected to grow immensely due to demographic and lifestyle changes.

#### **About EULAR:**

The European League against Rheumatism (EULAR) is the European umbrella organisation in the area of rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases. EULAR represents scientific societies, health professionals associations and organisations of people with arthritis/rheumatism throughout Europe. The aims of EULAR are



to reduce the burden of rheumatic diseases on the individual and society and to improve the treatment, prevention and rehabilitation of musculoskeletal diseases. More information at [www.eular.org](http://www.eular.org).

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