Ms Edite Estrela (MEP from Portugal, Chair of the Interest Group): “Welcome and Introduction”

Chair MEP Edite Estrela started the session by welcoming all participants to the 10th meeting of the Interest Group (IG) on Rheumatic and Musculoskeletal Diseases (RMDs). She then gave a short overview of the purpose and characteristics of the Interest Group and introduced the topic of the meeting by stating that it is important that health research, and particularly research in RMDs and other chronic diseases, get an adequate support from the EU. Ms Estrela then presented the agenda of the event and the speakers.

Mr. JOHAN UREEL, Head of Unit B1, Multi-Annual Financial Framework, European Commission):
“Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020 and the EU support to research and innovation Perspective of the DG Budget, European Commission”

Mr Ureel introduced the Commission’s proposal for spending structure under the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MMF), in particular he gave a detailed overview on the proposal under the sub-heading of the budget that is dealing with Smart and Inclusive growth strategies. He commented that although the Commission originally proposed to increase the support to R+I programmes by 70%, the increase, as negotiated by the Member States, is still acceptable. Given that the expenditure ceiling for sub-heading ”Competitiveness for Growth and Jobs" amounts to EUR 125.61 billion, this is an increase of more than 37% compared to the MFF 2007-2013. At the end of his speech, Mr Ureel underlined that there is a need to increase the funding for the EU research programme “Horizon 2020”, as committed by the Council, and he believes that an agreement between the European Parliament and Member States will be reached.

Mr TELEMACHOS TELEMACHOU, Counsellor for Research, Permanent Representation of Cyprus to the EU “The EU Council and the Cyprus perspective on the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020 and the EU support to research and innovation”

The presentation of Mr Telemachou was structured into 3 parts. In the first part he gave an insight from the Council negotiations on Horizon 2020 package and highlighted that within the Horizon 2020 Specific Programme, a special reference to RMDs has been adopted. In the second part, Mr Telemachou updated on the current “Trialogue” meetings and confirmed that substantial increase of
the financial means for future geared expenditures such as research, innovation and education, is required. Mr Telemachou concluded with the Cyprus perspective and underlined that the priorities under the European research area, including the support to health related programmes are strongly promoted. Last but not least, he expressed his confidence about the compromised budget agreement.

Mr. STEPHAN KUSTER Head of Policy Affairs, Science Europe “Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020 and the EU support to research and innovation The Scientific Community perspective”

Mr Kuster first introduced Science Europe, pointing out that the main purpose of the association is to contribute to a dialogue between the scientific society and policy makers by providing a sound, informed and evidence based contributions to the research policy debates. Mr. Kuster talked about the activities of SE within the field of health research. Particularly, he raised the impact of the upcoming regulation on personal data protection on the health research. In this context SE is developing a position paper as well as the organization would like to convene a scoping meeting with key stakeholders where synergies between ICT and health research on data management and protection should be explored. Last but not least, strategic meetings between Scientific Committees and member organizations are being held in order to help identify key focal points for health research topics and explore funding possibilities.

DR. MARIA VIDAL (DG Research, Deputy Head of Unit F2, Medical and public health research, European Commission) “The Commission perspective on the EU Budget & the EU support to health research and innovation”

Further perspective of the Commission was given by Ms. Maria Vidal, who is in charge of managing research in chronic conditions. Ms Vidal gave an overview on the health related research and innovation initiatives under the current and upcoming framework programmes; in particular she presented the Commission’s proposal on chronic diseases research in Horizon 2020.

At the beginning of her presentation, Ms Vidal referred to several figures that underline the heavy burden of chronic diseases to the healthcare system and society in general. She pointed out that musculoskeletal disorders account for almost 50% of work absence within the EU. In this context she mentioned that so far 4 bill EUR were invested in health projects under the current Health programme and 1 bill EUR under the largest private-public partnership for better and safer medication- the Innovative Medicine Initiative.

As for the future of chronic diseases research within Horizon 2020, the Commission’s priority is to move from laboratory to clinic and healthcare, from treatment to prevention as well as to ensure that research and innovation to tackle specific societal challenges such as healthy ageing receive enough support. The new framework programme also intends to support innovation and activities close to the market, for instance support to SMEs and simplification of the programme architecture.
and consequently the reimbursement model. Ms. Vidal concluded that the current Commission’s proposal for health research amounts to 8.5 bill EUR.

PROF. MAURIZIO CUTOLO EULAR President Elect “What chronic disease research will the EU need in the future?”

Prof. Cutolo’s presentation focused on the priorities for health research in the chronic disease field, pointing out that research should focus on the prevention in chronicity. Firstly, he elaborated on the major musculoskeletal conditions and their impact on the society providing evidence on chronic diseases prevalence. Amongst others, Prof. Cutolo pointed out that globally, Europe has the highest burden of chronic diseases which are responsible for 86% of all deaths. In this context he mentioned that health research is an investment with a high return, not a cost, referring to the increasing number of dependent and disabled people and hence raising health and social care costs. For these reasons, there is a need to invest into basic and laboratory research, optimized treatments, new clinical tools for early diagnosis and last but not least the collaborative approach towards research on a “common problem” – chronicity is strongly preferred. In regards to what has been said, Prof. Cutolo underlined that the EU Member States should exchange best practice and collaborate on chronic inflammation research themes in order to improve prevention methods and elaborate on common guidelines.

Mr. IVAILO KALFIN (MEP from Bulgaria, Vice-Chair of the Budget Committee) “The European Parliament perspective on the EU Budget & the EU support to health research and innovation”

Mr Kalfin gave a profound update on the progress of the budget debate from the Parliament’s perspective. He mentioned that the Commission provided good basis for the budget negotiations and indicated that the Parliament’s priority is to agree on an affordable and flexible solution, which would allow for future adjustments according to the development of the economic situation. He also mentioned that the simplification of the funding procedure is strongly preferred in order to help the scientific community.

Further Mr. Kalfin remarked that there is a need to increase the budget for the research and innovation programmes, as under the current proposal within the sub heading “Smart and Inclusive Growth”, there was only a slight increase for the research and innovation funds in comparison to the adjustment for the transportation and infrastructure programmes. In this context, Mr Kalfin referred to the research budgets of other global players such as USA or China and remarked that EU should be able to compete with them.
Ms Edite Estrela (MEP from Portugal, Chair of the Interest Group) “Discussion with participants and closing remarks”

Ms Estrela opened the discussion by mentioning that the Interest Group on RMDs is one of the most active Interest Groups in the European Parliament. Taking into account the burden of RMDs, she supported the Parliament’s position to increase the budget for research and innovation programmes as well as supported Prof Cutolo in advocating for prevention in chronicity which could lead to the reduction in the incidence of these conditions. Mr David Boyed from GE Healthcare approved on Ms. Estrela’s support to increase the prevention as one of the means to lower the financial burden and pointed out that early intervention is essential. In this context Mr Hadley Hamilton, a chairman of the Ankylosing Spondylitis International Federation, draw attention to the people’s ability to work and mentioned that focus should be also given on strategies that are helping people with RMDs to return back to work. Ms. Mervi Kristiina from The Finnish Rheumatism Association contributed to the discussion by underlining the importance of prevention; in particular she mentioned to the secondary prevention and rehabilitation. In her opinion, rehabilitation strategies can help people to integrate to work and therefore should be promoted amongst the Horizon 2020 programmes.

Towards the end of the discussion, participants recognised and approved on several crucial points. First of all, the availability of EU funding has to be improved, which means that once the organizations decide to apply, the administrative procedures should be simplified. Further, the importance of prevention as an instrument to lower the incidence rate has been underlined and consequently, programs supporting people’s ability to return to the labour market should be promoted. Last but not least the participants also agreed that basic and clinical research should be combined.

At the end of the meeting Ms. Estrela thanked everyone for the participation in the meeting and the fruitful contributions and invited the participants to attend the forthcoming meeting in June.

About rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases

Chronic rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases affect almost one-quarter of all Europeans (more than 120 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 on www.eular.org.

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