RheumaMap

A Research Roadmap to transform the lives of people with Rheumatic and Musculoskeletal Diseases

Summary

1. For the full RheumaMap, please head to eular.org or click here.
1. Burden of RMDs

Rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases (RMDs) are among the most prevalent, disabling and burdensome noncommunicable diseases in Europe eliciting high costs for European healthcare and social security budgets. The causes of more than 200 RMDs (including a number of rare diseases) are unknown and there are still no cures for the 120 million people suffering from these diseases.

Research and innovation is crucial to improve our understanding of the causes and characteristics of RMDs and to develop better prevention strategies and treatments. To provide a concise overview of the unmet needs that are required in research for RMDs, RheumaMap has been compiled to address and highlight the challenges and opportunities for the coming years. It was developed in cooperation with the members of EULAR, namely scientific societies, patient organisations and health professional associations from all European countries.

**Aims of RheumaMap:**
- To **prevent** the onset of RMDs
- To promote higher levels of early **diagnosis of RMDs**
- To promote higher levels of secondary prevention (or mitigation of impact once established) of RMDs
- To **optimise care of people with existing RMDs**
- To reduce **morbidity** and **mortality** in people with RMDs
- To **reintegrate individuals into society**

2. Key issues for research and innovation in RMDs

There are a number of barriers that inhibit the effective deployment of research and innovation and RMDs across Europe as identified in RheumaMap. These are the following:

- Research into RMDs is lacking coordination and integration with respect to long-term planning in many major areas.
- Research in Europe remains dispersed, even though where effective networks were formed the outcomes were successful and significant.
- There is a persistent scarcity of funding resources.
• Scientific institutions are willing to cooperate, but depend on short-term project funding, limiting them to collaboration in often rather narrow areas.

• EU Member States and other European countries are promoting research into RMDs to very different degrees, and without sufficient cooperation.

• Priorities are often defined in total isolation across distinct states or regions.

Reducing the burden of RMDs on individuals and societies requires comprehensive and coordinated actions at EU, national and regional level, as well as in different policy areas such as public health, health care and employment & social affairs. Scarcity of funding resources, but also the need to foster scientific excellence throughout the continent, leads to the conclusion that strategic coordination for a field as important as RMDs would be of added value. Furthermore, long-term strategic coordination will provide both the scientific community and funding organisations at international, EU and national level with orientations for long-term investment – and inspire strategic prioritisation during the next decade.

3. Common unmet research needs

RheumaMap identifies the priorities and main challenges in RMD research and innovation for a number of individual diseases. However, some common themes exist across RMDs:

I. Across all RMDs, a unifying imperative unmet need is identified, namely the need to seek preventive measures for RMDs. This will, for example, include identification of risk factors that can be modified, or earlier medical interventions based on early disease detection that can help cure the disease. Crucially, reduction in RMDs will increase levels of physical activity and in turn impact favourably on a range of other chronic disorders including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, Alzheimer’s disease, depression and others.

II. RMDs are increasingly recognised as reciprocally associated with an increased co-morbid burden including for example cardiovascular disease, depression and diabetes. A common research focus across RMDs is therefore necessary to understand, identify and treat aggressively co-morbid conditions.

Beyond these overall issues RheumaMap offers a comprehensive overview of the key unmet research needs for the most common RMDs and can be found here.
4. Policy implications

As the full RheumaMap shows, there are a substantial number of unmet needs for RMDs and furthering research and innovation in these fields is therefore crucial. Evidence-based policies are urgently needed. They have to be based on the key aims of improving access to timely, high-quality health care and improvement of working conditions. People with RMDs deserve to lead independent lives, remain active in the labour market and fully participate in the fabric of our community. There is thus both a duty and an overwhelming business case for supporting the economic and social participation of people with RMDs. However, the impact of these policies will be limited without a better understanding of the causes and causality of RMDs, more accurate diagnostic tools, more effective therapies to limit and prevent their disabling consequences and, eventually, a pathway to a cure. It will be best achieved by facilitating full participation of people with RMDs in the prioritisation of research topics and the design and conduct of research.

The substantial unmet needs in the area of research that were highlighted in RheumaMap, will however require an altogether higher level of commitment and innovation. Implementation of the distinct elements contained in RheumaMap will depend on scientists, patients and health professionals. Equally, it will require an unwavering, strong commitment from policy-makers at the EU and national level, as well as the support of international organisations, industry and other stakeholders. A multi-faceted approach that includes a clear policy dimension can, if properly implemented, generate a positive evolution in the management of RMDs along the entire pathway, from therapeutic innovation to treatment and rehabilitation to prevention. The tremendous potential for benefit will only arise when Member States of the EU, other European countries, and European institutions develop new ways of working together to address the challenge of RMDs with a long-term perspective. A new form of cooperation between all relevant actors is therefore required to maximise cost-effectiveness whilst increasing equality of outcomes for citizens.

With RheumaMap, EULAR and the RMD community anticipates and stands ready to support such collaboration and calls on policy-makers and stakeholders to take RheumaMap into account in the development and implementation of policy over the coming years to lift the enormous burden of RMDs on citizens, societies and economies.

About EULAR

The European League against Rheumatism (EULAR) is the European umbrella organisation representing scientific societies, health professional associations and organisations for people with RMDs. EULAR aims to reduce the burden of RMDs on individuals and society and to improve the treatment, prevention and rehabilitation of RMDs.

To this end, EULAR fosters excellence in education and research in the field of rheumatology. It promotes the translation of research advances into daily care and fights for the recognition of the needs of people with RMDs by the EU institutions through advocacy action.