

EULAR calls on governments in Europe to recognise the most vulnerable during COVID-19

19 March, 2020, Kilchberg, Switzerland – The European League Against Rheumatism, EULAR, calls for a number of measures to be considered in all efforts by the European Commission and by national governments and stakeholders across Europe in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This situation must be immediately addressed and amended in order to reduce the enormous burden that it could place on already overstretched health care systems everywhere.

EULAR calls on all governments to specifically identify patients whose therapies can affect their immune system: While rheumatology staff are currently advising patients directly if they are in the high risk category, this is not explicitly reinforced by government guidelines across Europe. If an individual is on biologic therapy such as an anti-TNF or anti-IL 17A then the immune system could be lower than others in the population. This means symptoms may be worse if an infection or virus is contracted. Governments are advising those who are at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19 to be particularly stringent in following social distancing measures. Current government advice at the national level, however, does not explicitly include those who are taking drugs which could affect their immune system. This would protect the lives of millions of individuals across Europe.

Support individuals with rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases in the workplace: EU citizens with a rheumatic and musculoskeletal disease (RMD) who are professionally active in the health care and medical area have the right to be safe at work. Access to suitable equipment to support the individual in the performance of their work at all times must be granted with immediate effect.

EULAR has released guidance for patients in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak. The guidance addresses typical questions that patients with RMDs have and recommends protective measures both for patients and the health care workforce. More information and a video can be found at https://www.eular.org/eular_guidance_for_patients_covid19_outbreak.cfm. The website page contains links to other useful sources of information: EULAR, together with its US counterpart, the American College of Rheumatology, is working on a repository of global information about COVID-19 for use by doctors, patients and health professionals.

Given the workload and, increasingly, the shortage of medical doctors and health professionals in hospitals and other facilities, EULAR calls on policy makers to ensure that there is flexibility for ensuring access to medical advice for RMD patients. This can for instance be done through online consultations and documentation, issuing of electronic prescriptions and other, virtual means. Work incapacity certificates and documentation relating to the renewal of prescriptions should be delivered by doctors without requiring a patient's personal presence, either at the doctor's practice or in a hospital. Alternatively, prescriptions should simply be renewed automatically.

The health of health care professionals needs to be protected. Many healthcare staff who themselves have RMDs or other chronic conditions may have health needs, which should be taken into account in hospital and health centre workforce planning, including the provision of protective equipment. Many European countries have not yet issued guidelines for health professionals and doctors affected by chronic conditions regarding how they should manage the risk of infection in their daily practice. The European Union should take action to accelerate identification and implementation of best practices; national and regional health authorities are urged to address the needs of those parts of the health workforce affected by chronic diseases.

Current challenges also present **positive opportunities to support better working conditions for all employees, including people with RMDs**. As the workforce is massively shifted to telework, policy makers and employers should inform citizens about legal requirements that apply to telework. They should also help employees and self-employed people to equip their workplaces in the home adequately in order to avoid an unprecedented increase in the incidence of back pain and other work-related conditions. People affected by RMDs deserve particular attention to help their retention in the workforce. Taking these steps would ensure a significant number of people are better able to participate actively in the workforce going forward. EULAR would like to underline the positive impact of measures facilitating retention and return to work for people living with chronic conditions, including in the health sector where currently every professional is needed.

Closure of borders: Access to medicines is fundamental for many RMD patients; given the high level of integration of pharmaceutical trade in Europe, disruption of distribution chains must be avoided at all cost. EULAR welcomes the European Commission's guidelines on health-related border management measures in the context of the COVID-19 emergency, which were presented to the EU Ministers of Health and Home Affairs on 16/03.¹

Coordination of public health in the European Union and beyond: EULAR underlines the need for optimal coordination of public health in Europe. National and regional governments are called upon to work together closely, identify priorities and needs together and act in a collaborative manner. There should be no place for isolated decision-making or even national decisions impacting negatively on the health of citizens in other countries.

Health is a priority for citizens. **EULAR calls on national and regional governments to invest in their health systems, rather than seeing them as a place to make savings**. The current crisis is putting European health systems to the test and is highlighting the need for well-funded, well-equipped and well-organised health systems. Governments must act to make their health systems fit for current and future challenges.

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.

Contact

Ursula Aring, EULAR Public Affairs Manager, ursula.aring@eular.org Tel. +41 44 716 30 38

Footnotes

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_468