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EP Interest Group on Rheumatic and Musculoskeletal Diseases

Meeting IG-13-18/03/2014

“What EU public health policy 2014-2019? The EU contribution to public health in recent years and the challenge for the next Parliamentary and Commission terms”

MINUTES

Executive Summary:

The last IG meeting of the present European Parliament term discussed on the EU role in public health policy-making. Despite the fact that the main competences within the health area remain at the Member States level, participants agreed that the EU has a distinct added value to offer: First of all, it provides a comprehensive agenda-setting and funding for health related issues, thus complementing and coordinating Member States' often diverse policies. Moreover, the EU exerts a strong influence through single market topics that flank health issues. While noting the trend towards greater EU action, some panellists called for greater disease-specific initiatives, with healthy ageing emerging as a major future challenge. In this vein, the need for RMD-targeted initiatives such as an EU Strategy on RMDs was put forward.

Edite Estrela (MEP from Portugal, Chair of the Interest Group)

“Welcome and Introduction”

MEP Estrela opened the 13th meeting of the Interest Group (IG) on Rheumatic and Musculoskeletal Diseases (RMDs), which constituted the final meeting for the 2009-2014 European Parliament term. She briefly elaborated on the work of the IG and introduced the theme of the meeting, which aimed to discuss the role the EU has had in shaping public health policies during the current EP and Commission mandates. Ms Estrela pointed out that the meeting aimed to look back at EU initiatives and strategies, and against this background sought to identify lessons learned and how the role of the EU should be adapted to future challenges.



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Sylvain Giraud (Head of Unit D1 'Health Strategy and International', DG SANCO, European Commission)
"The European Commission's contribution to public health in recent years: Achievements, lessons and challenges"

Mr Giraud gave an overview of the Commission's activities in health policy during the past years. Whilst a competence of the Member States, health is a cross-cutting issue that resonates in a wide range of policies, including workforce productivity, economic growth, social policy and research/technology. The Commission's main activity is therefore to tie health to economic governance, making it a political objective across economic programmes. It does so by complementing national policies through frameworks that stimulate cooperation between Member States. In this regard, Mr Giraud briefly outlined the EU Health Strategy of 2007 and the Investing in Health policy paper, among other initiatives. Mr Giraud pointed out that the added value of EU action is that it complements Member States' efforts by a) establishing a binding regulatory environment in the areas flanking health policies, namely the single market; b) creating the political tools for cooperation via its programmes; and c) providing for additional health policy funding. Thus, the EU serves as a catalyst for stronger Member State cooperation in health.

Loukas Georgiou (Attaché for Public Health and Pharmaceuticals, Permanent Representation of the Republic of Cyprus to the EU)

"The EU support to Member States' efforts in public health: The Cypriot perspective"

Mr Georgiou underlined the sustainability of national healthcare systems as the principal challenge for the public health policies. Due to the present-day economic crisis and its ensuing austerity measures, there is a discrepancy between the need to cut healthcare costs and the constantly mounting expenses caused by a rapidly ageing population. Future health policy should therefore increasingly focus on greater investments into preventive and early detection measures. To this end, Mr Georgiou stressed that more attention must be given to tackling RMDs as they are a major cause of illness and pain for the elderly. Implementation of Healthy ageing programmes at national level will therefore be instrumental in providing affordable healthcare in the future. In this sense, tackling the burden of RMDs, as one of the most disabling condition in Europe has been put forward in regard to the creation of sustainable healthcare systems.

Dr Kai Michelsen (Assistant Professor, Faculty of International Health, Maastricht University)

"The added value of EU public health policies: A critical overview"

Dr Michelsen seconded Mr Giraud's assertion that the EU exerts much added value by complementing Member States' existing public health policies. According to Dr Michelsen, many



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advances have been made in recent years that have turned the EU into a major player in health policies. He stressed the EU's particularly prominent agenda-setting role: While there are many contesting institutions involved, the EU manages to structure the manifold issues that exist in public health management into coherent definitions of the problems at hand and benchmarks for policy objectives. It has been noted that the volume of investment within health sector still remains one of the main challenges, since health and economic objectives are often contradictory. Moreover, national health systems and patterns of disease prevalence differ considerably, making it difficult to devise universally applicable solutions – something that is yet further aggravated by the low visibility of policy outcomes and cumbersome fact-finding to underpin the effectiveness of EU action with scientific evidence.

Leonardo Palumbo (Policy Coordinator for EU Affairs, European Public Health Alliance EPHA)

“EPHA’s perspective and assessment of the EU’s work in public health”

Mr Palumbo welcomed the EU's increased role in health, commending in particular the increased health spending through Horizon 2020 in spite of times of austerity. He however also regretted the lack of a EU-wide health impact assessment process. He announced that for the forthcoming EP and Commission terms, EPHA will focus its activities not only on health itself but also on policies outside of the health sector impacting on health., notably health and safety in the workplace; gearing economic governance towards more respect for health concerns; and the launching of an Anti-Discrimination Directive for patients' greater social empowerment. To this end EPHA is calling to consider the health dimension in the overall EU strategy.

Neil Betteridge (EULAR International Liaison Officer, Public Affairs)

“The rheumatic and musculoskeletal disease community’s perspective and expectations”

Mr Betteridge's presentation took stock of EU action in health from the RMD community's perspective. He welcomed what the chronic disease reflection process, the European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing and the Cross-Border Health care Directive as important initiative. However, he also highlighted the shortcomings in the EU's approach, which the RMD community seeks to address. He particularly noted that EU actions should focus more strongly on the socio-economic impacts of different diseases (and not only on mortality rates) when prioritising policy actions. He also stressed that EU policies have in the past been rather generic while major, complex chronic diseases such as RMDs deserve specific attention. Mr Betteridge stressed the need for policies to put greater emphasis on prevention instead of the mere treatment of conditions after they arise. Finally, he reiterated the need for a concerted EU Strategy on RMDs, outlining the principal issues such a strategy would have to address.



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Sören Haar (Head of EULAR Brussels Office)

“Evaluating the work and contributions of the Interest Group”

Mr Haar gave a brief summary of the Interest Group’s activities since its inception in 2009. He presented the IG’s composition, goals and the topics covered throughout the 13 meetings. He mentioned a wide variety of topics that comprised not only health policies and legislation but also medical research and the socio-economic impacts of RMDs. With a total of more than 240 participants and almost 100 organisations involved, he called the IG alive and well-attended. The preliminary feedback gathered from participants noted the high quality of speakers and the interest in IG outcomes, which evidences the importance that MEPs and other EU decision-makers attribute to RMD issues.

MEP Edite Estrela closed the meeting, expressing her hopes for the IG to be reconstituted after the EP elections.

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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