

EULAR
12.10.20
Kilchberg,
Switzerland

EULAR: WORKPLACE EXCLUSION OF PEOPLE WITH ARTHRITIS COMPOUNDED BY COVID-19

EULAR calls for comprehensive EU led RMD strategy on World Arthritis Day

Brussels, 12 October 2020, On the occasion of World Arthritis Day, EULAR – the European League Against Rheumatism (EULAR) – has called upon the European Union to work with member states to create a comprehensive strategy to tackle rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases (RMDs). The COVID pandemic has compounded the risks facing this vulnerable group and, with Europe facing the growing challenges of an ageing population and workforce, it is vital that the EU addresses the hidden costs of workplace exclusion for people suffering one of the over two hundred diseases under the RMD umbrella.

It is estimated that over 100 million European citizens, many of whom are young and working age, currently suffer with RMDs. They are the main occupational disease, accounting for around 60% of all health problems in the workplace,¹ and are the biggest cause of sick leave and premature retirement due to work disability in Europe.

The pandemic has compounded the challenges faced by this vulnerable group in different ways. Some have **greater vulnerability to COVID-19** due to being treated with immunosuppressants and steroids or have a common co-morbidity, such as cardiovascular disease, that signify higher risk. RMD sufferers have also been affected by **reduced access to medication**, or the reprioritisation of healthcare facilities away from people with chronic conditions. **Job access and security** is also a highly significant concern as RMD sufferers may face potential workplace absenteeism during a global downturn.

Speaking during the [EULAR Brussels Forum](#), a high-level online panel discussion on the “Employment risks and impacts for Europeans with RMDs during the COVID Recession”, [Professor Iain McInnes](#), [EULAR President](#), said: *“For many people living with RMDs job insecurity and unemployment are a daily reality that much of the rest of society only experiences in times of crisis. The pandemic has created new workplace barriers for Europeans with RMDs, but it has also highlighted the opportunities flexible working patterns and digital workplace and healthcare solutions can offer this community.”*

The exclusion of RMD patients from the workplace costs Europe an estimated €163bn annually. The short-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the longer-term trend of an ageing European population, are expected to dramatically increase this impact without urgent action.

¹ van der Heijde D, Daikh DI, Betteridge N, et al. Common language description of the term rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases (RMDs) for use in communication with the lay public, healthcare providers and other stakeholders endorsed by the European League Against Rheumatism (EULAR) and the American College of Rheumatology (ACR). *Ann Rheum Dis*. 2018;77(6):829-832. doi:10.1136/annrheumdis-2017-212565

² Arnold, L.M., Clauw, D.J. et al., Improving the Recognition and Diagnosis of Fibromyalgia. (2011) 86(5): 457-464

³ Stevens MJ, Walker-Bone K, Culliford DJ, et al. Work participation, mobility and foot symptoms in people with systemic lupus erythematosus: findings of a UK national survey. *J Foot Ankle Res*. 2019;12:26. Published 2019 Apr 29. doi:10.1186/s13047-019-0335-0. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6489339/>

⁴ Altman, RD, Early management of osteoarthritis. *The American Journal of Managed Care* (2010) 16(2): S41-47⁵ Versus Arthritis, “The State of Musculoskeletal Health 2019.” Accessed July 7, 2020. <https://www.versusarthritis.org/media/14594/state-of-musculoskeletal-health-2019.pdf>

Roberta Metsola, MEP, Chair of the European Parliament Interest Group on RMDs added: “To support the economic recovery, and ensure that Europe can cope with an ageing population and workforce in the future, the EU must act decisively to develop a comprehensive approach to tackling the hidden human and economic cost of excluding people with RMDs from the workplace. One element of the EU strategy on RMDs must be to ensure that the post-2020 EU disability strategy better responds to the employment needs of people with RMDs, and sets member states clear targets and timelines to ensure adequate resources are available.”

Europe needs policies and programmes that create an open, positive and supportive culture between patients, colleagues, and employers; including strong protection against workplace discrimination. It also needs to create ergonomic workplaces to increase comfort and reduce risk of accidents and flares, as well as to promote flexible work schedules and tele-working. The EU should also guide and support the Member States as they develop strategies to deliver more effective RMD-related health promotion, prevention, treatment and rehabilitation.

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About EULAR

EULAR is a non-profit scientific organisation based in Zurich, Switzerland, representing scientific societies, societies of other health professionals, professional associations and organisations for people with rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases (RMDs). The aim of EULAR is to reduce the burden of RMDs on the individual and society and to improve the treatment, prevention and rehabilitation of RMDs. Further information: www.eular.org

About the EULAR Brussels Forum

To mark World Arthritis Day, a global awareness day held on 12 October each year, EULAR seeks discussion with members of the EU policy arena, helping to create and maintain awareness around topics directly concerning people with rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases (RMDs) in society.

To this end, EULAR began an annual EULAR Brussels *Conference* in 2010; in 2020, this meeting is renamed the **EULAR Brussels Forum**, providing a fully online space for ideas and views to be exchanged and shared with society at large and thereby contribute to bringing change forward. Visit: https://www.eular.org/eular_brussels_forum.cfm

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