

CHRONIC DISEASE IN EUROPE: UNITED FOR PREVENTION

Joint meeting of the MEP Heart Group, the MEP Group for Kidney Health, the EU Diabetes Working Group and MEPs Against Cancer

5 October 2010, European Parliament, Brussels

Meeting Report

- *Welcome and Introduction*

MEP Linda McAvan introduced this first joint initiative of the four MEP groups, who united forces on the common challenge of tackling the rise in chronic diseases across the EU.

- *Preventing Chronic Diseases: health professionals united in a joint approach*

Professor Mark Thursz presented the policy recommendations defined by the Chronic Disease Alliance, an alliance of 10 not-for-profit, science-based European organizations representing over 100 000 health professionals in the EU. Whereas chronic disease accounts for 86% of death in the EU, and despite the fact that prevention is more effective than treatment, only 3% of healthcare spending is currently targeted at prevention.

The Chronic Disease Alliance therefore outlines practical recommendations for the EU and Member States to tackle four key risk factors of chronic diseases: alcohol, tobacco, nutrition and physical activity.

These policy recommendations can be presented along four axes:

- Choice and Information: giving EU citizen the right information in order to exercise their choice
 - Disclosure of the physical, chemical contents of all tobacco products
 - Standardized packaging of cigarettes : remove branding elements, 80% of the packet front & back devoted to pictorial health warnings
 - Mandatory food labelling: including traffic light colour-coding , facilitate consumer education and understanding
 - Educational programmes to reinforce awareness of alcohol related problems in preparation for specific interventions
- Incentives to healthy behaviours:
 - Ensure taxation on tobacco and alcohol is harmonised at a high level across the EU
 - Promote measures to increase the affordability of healthy food choices
 - Promote physical activity in urban development
 - Prioritise the needs of pedestrians and cyclists over motorists
 - Provide access to facilities for physical activity
- The default healthy option:
 - Ban internet sales of tobacco
 - Prohibit marketing of unhealthy food to children through television and non-broadcast media
 - Ban alcohol advertising, promotion and sponsorship of events via TV and radio programmes and sports
- Consumer safety:
 - Urge Member States to implement and enforce comprehensive smoke free legislation
 - Prohibit trans fatty acids in the food supply
 - Reduce salt and saturated fats in foods
 - Prioritise non-communicable diseases within the health programme of DG Research 7th & 8th Framework Programme

Establishing healthy policies along those recommendations would not necessarily be costly. While investment is required in some cases (subsidies for healthy foods, activity and sport programmes and facilities, alcohol dependence programmes), most recommendations on setting better standards, regulations or labelling practices are revenue neutral, and recommendations on increased taxation of alcohol and tobacco would generate additional revenue.

- *How can science help to address the growing burden of chronic disease?*

Professor Karin Sipido presented the contribution of science to alleviate the burden of chronic diseases.

In front of this challenge, medical research is currently in search of novel paradigms:

- Shift focus from treatment to early prevention: this shift will be possible thanks to better understanding of biomarkers, the molecular markers of diseases. Early screening and detection of biomarkers will enable to develop “secondary prevention”, ie actions targeting populations who are on the verge of developing diseases or at an early stage of the disease.
- Boost translational research on new treatments, with an increased interaction between physicians, biotechnology industries and multidisciplinary basic researchers.
- Set up new types of research partnerships, including between the public and private sector.

Achieving these paradigms changes will very much depend on the funding agenda of the EU. While the European Commission already manages 5% of total public R&D spending in the European Union, European funding should be increased in light of the growing transnational dimension of research. The key question now is whether EU and national policy makers will answer the call of the science community.

Finally, Professor Sipido highlighted that major scientific societies across key disease areas (diabetes, cardiovascular, respiratory disease and cancer), acknowledging the need to jointly define future research priorities and strategy, have recently come together in an Alliance for Biomedical Research in Europe (Biomed Alliance), to be formally launched in December 2010.

- *UN NCD summit - the EU contribution in partnership with European civil society*

Baroness Sarah Ludford presented the rationale of the United Nations Summit on Non Communicable Diseases, which will take place in September 2011.

Nongovernmental health organizations in the diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer and chronic respiratory disease field have united to create the NCD Alliance, with a view to putting non-communicable diseases on the global agenda.

This Alliance has been instrumental in gaining support for a UN Summit on Non Communicable Diseases, where new strategies to tackle the global burden of non-communicable disease will be decided.

As two UN member countries will be appointed to steer the preparation of this summit, MEPs together with the members of the Chronic Disease Alliance call on EU member states to coordinate their position based on the work of the Belgian presidency on chronic diseases, and to seek the appointment of one EU member state in the steering group.

- *Tackling risk factors: why is it such a political hurdle when the evidence is so strong?*

Frieda Brepoels MEP presented the evidence on the four main risk factors of chronic diseases. While pointing out the failure of voluntary approaches in the area of tobacco and alcohol consumption, she highlighted a series of legislative measures and actions that should be taken forward at EU level to tackle each of them.

In the area of tobacco, the EU should act on establishing harmonised taxation at a high level, adopting a compulsory standardized packaging with all branding elements removed and 80% of the packet front and back devoted to pictorial health warnings, ensuring the transparency of dealings with tobacco industry, and banning internet sales of tobacco.

Regarding nutrition, the EU should propose the reformulation of products by reducing fat, sugar and salt content of mainstream food and drink products, and introduce an EU-wide ban on industrially produced trans fats.

Improving physical activity patterns lies mainly in the hands of competent authorities in the Member States. The EU can however also contribute, by monitoring citizens' participation in physical activity through regular surveys and by assessing the effectiveness of interventions in this area.

Finally, Mrs Brepoels called on the European Parliament to take a leading role in setting clear political priorities at EU level to tackle the four main risk factors of chronic diseases.

- *Discussion:*

Discussion between MEPs and participants highlighted the need for health organizations to reach out to MEPs and national policy makers outside the health area.

In the wake of a major reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, it is in particular key to meet with policy makers dealing with agriculture, who have a great power over food and nutrition policy, in order to counter lobbying from the food and tobacco industry.

It is also important to convince policy makers dealing with finance that tackling chronic disease is a major economic investment for the future, and a key tool to ensure the sustainability of public finances in an ageing EU.

MEPs and participants further debated the key issue of striking the right balance between establishing health-friendly public policies, which by nature seek to influence individual behaviours and lifestyles, and safeguarding EU citizen's right to exercise their freedom of choice and be responsible for their health.

- *Conclusion and Statement of MEPs against Chronic Diseases*

Finally, Alojz Peterle MEP presented the joint statement from the four MEP groups calling on the EU and Member States to take action on the prevention of chronic diseases.

This statement will be presented to the Belgian Presidency ahead of the conference "Innovative approaches for chronic illness in Public Health and Health care systems" on 19-20 October 2010.