

## Chronic Disease in Europe

*United for Prevention*

In an unprecedented effort to raise awareness of the need to prevent chronic diseases, the MEP Group for Kidney Health joined forces with the MEP Heart Group, MEPs against Cancer II and the EU Diabetes Working Group to organize a seminar in the European Parliament on 5 October to present policy recommendations to address the four major risk factors for chronic diseases: alcohol and tobacco use, physical inactivity and poor nutrition.

The Co-Chairs of the four MEP Groups addressed an audience of policymakers, health professionals and health activists, with the message that addressing chronic diseases will allow Europeans to lead longer and healthier lives, stay longer in the workforce and contribute to reversing the negative labour force growth which is predicted for 2020.



“Chronic diseases are largely preventable and in this respect the European Parliament has a major role to play” said Frieda Brepoels, Chair of the MEP Group for Kidney Health. She continued “a higher investment in prevention is needed”, in particular by raising

awareness about common risk factors and promoting healthy lifestyles”.

Linda McAvan, Co-Chair of the MEP Heart Group, stressed the need for a common approach to preventing chronic diseases, and that while the EU has limited competence to legislate in the field of health, it can encourage the sharing of experience and best practice between Member States as well as facilitate joint research.



Mark Thursz, Vice-Secretary of the European Association for the Study of the Liver, shed light on the burden of chronic diseases in Europe, which account for 35% of DALYs (Disability Adjusted Life Years). Professor Thursz stated that governments spend 97% of their healthcare budgets on treatments and only 3% on prevention and stressed the need for a shift in policy to give higher priority to preventative actions, adding that “health policies do not have to be costly to be caring”.

Karen Sipido of the European Society of Cardiology talked about the response of science to chronic

diseases. Professor Sipido claimed that more research into biomarkers may enable scientists to understand genetic markers for disease. She added that research is no longer confined to academia and that collaboration between academia and industry is imperative to ensure that practical applications of scientific findings are implemented.

Professor Sipido highlighted the EU's regulation of medical research as an issue that has caused disparities in the burden of regulation for clinical investigators across Europe and which must be addressed in order to facilitate European research. Professor Andrew Rees, Chair of the European Kidney Health Alliance, added that as far as medical research is concerned, patients should always be involved in discussions about their rights.

Baroness Sarah Ludford, Co-Chair of the EU Diabetes Working Group, talked about the upcoming UN Summit on Non-Communicable diseases that is scheduled for September 2011. The Summit is expected to conclude with an outcome statement, setting goals and deadlines, and Baroness Ludford stressed the importance of providing input to the civil society movement that is currently being built to ensure strong results from the Summit.

Frieda Brepoels, Chair of the MEP Group for Kidney Health, gave the example of the number of people facing dialysis or kidney transplantation as proof of the failure of governments to implement public health policies geared at the prevention of chronic diseases such as chronic kidney disease.

She added that in general, legislative instruments have proven to be effective in improving public health whereas self-regulation has often failed.

Mrs Brepoels highlighted the fact that even small changes to diet, for example, can reap significant benefits, studies having shown that reducing dietary salt by 3 grams per day may reduce the annual number of deaths from any cause by over 30 per

cent. She concluded with the stark fact that chronic diseases account for 86% of deaths in the EU and that policies addressing the four identified health determinants would most certainly save lives and money, adding that the Parliament should play a leading role in this regard.

Alojz Peterle, Chair of MEPs against Cancer II concluded the seminar by calling on MEPs, the European Commission, the Council of Ministers and national governments to work together to tackle the problem of chronic diseases.

"It is only by working in partnership that we will be able to put in place effective Europe-wide policies aimed at preventing these conditions that cause so much suffering and death each year. Prevention is undoubtedly cheaper than disease management and treatment and, therefore, it makes economic sense to pursue these policies now at a time when many national governments are having to curb their expenditure", said Dr Peterle.



*The next meeting of the MEP Group for Kidney Health is planned for March 2011*

***"EKHA takes a multidisciplinary approach involving patients and their families, doctors and nurses, researchers and other healthcare professionals who work cooperatively for a European health environment in which there is a sustained decrease in kidney disease and its consequences.***