

European and national leaders call on policymakers to recognise socio-economic impact of rheumatic and musculoskeletal disorders on the European workforce
[National Organisations May Adapt Press Release Headlines to Suit National Facts / Participation in the Conference / National Plan status etc]

Call made for national plans to keep people living with long-term conditions in work

Budapest, 21 April 2011 – Today, people living with rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases (RMDs) joined leaders in rheumatology from across the EU to demand that policymakers **acknowledge the impact RMDs have on a person’s ability to participate in society** and so **create national plans to address the burden of RMDs**.

The call to action was made at the Hungarian EU Presidency Conference, “The Burden of Rheumatic and Musculoskeletal Diseases (RMDs): Challenges in Work Capacity and Prevention of Disability in the EU”, jointly hosted by the Hungarian Association of Rheumatologists, the European League Against Rheumatism (EULAR), and the Fit for Work Europe Coalition, under the auspices of the Hungarian Presidency.

The European Commission estimates that RMDs account for **half of all absences from work and for 60 per cent of permanent work incapacity**ⁱ. “With RMDs as the leading cause of disability in Europe, it is critical that national policy-makers address RMDs, shifting them from being disabling conditions to manageable conditions. Europe has a role to play in this, and RMDs should be reflected in the Council Conclusions on the European Disability Strategy,” said Professor Paul Emery, President of European League Against Rheumatism, and a co-President of the Fit for Work Coalition.

The EU Disability Strategy 2010-2020 aims to empower people with disabilities so that they can enjoy their full rights as citizens. Policy-makers, health professionals and employers must work closely together, the conference proposes, to realize this goal and increase participation of RMD patients in the workplace by removing barriers to employment.

“Today, we call for the European Union and national governments to make RMDs a priority in health policy,” said Mrs Antonyia Parvanova, MEP, and a co-president of the Fit for Work Europe Coalition. “Only through national plans, and concerted action based on evidence and sound policy choices, can we improve the working lives of those living with chronic RMDs.”

“Through joint undertaking at European and national level can change be possible for millions of Europeans unable to work due to disabilities caused by RMDs”, said Professor Gyula Poor, president of Hungarian Association of Rheumatologists, in introducing the Conference. “There is an urgent need for national action plans – and multi-stakeholder coalitions to implement them - on RMDs to better address the burden of rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases, and so better guide Member States on early intervention, prevention and appropriate management. The importance to society and to our economies cannot be stressed enough.”

“Despite the pain, the majority of people with RMDs are able to work and remain economically active, if their support needs are met. Advances in therapies are important in this respect,” said Neil Betteridge, EULAR Vice-President representing national patient organisations. “But so are a range of measures which the EU, its Member States and employers can take to ensure they provide an accessible workplace. Disability-related adjustments to the workplace are often cheaper than people think, like moving somebody’s desk to the ground floor if they have problems with stairs. The Disability Strategy could make a big difference to the lives of tens of millions of people with RMDs if, as EULAR is calling for, it is implemented effectively.”

During the conference, the stakeholders urged national governments to craft action plans implementing key recommendations which included:

- National clinical and policy guidance that allocates resources for prevention, early detection, appropriate intervention and effective management of RMDs

- National legislation that supports employees living with RMDs to remain in work
- European and national guidance for physicians that promotes better communication between primary care and secondary care, specifically so that staying in work may be considered a 'clinical outcome'
- Health economic assessments for interventions that includes social perspectives such as staying in work and the carers who support those with these diseases
- Accurate and effective collection of data on impact of RMDs in-country, including healthcare and societal costs associated with these long-term conditions.

Over 100 million Europeans live with RMDs, making it one of the most pressing health issues across the Union. The conference called upon all citizens to demand policies that support their fellow Europeans living with RMDs to participate ever more fully in society and in the workforce.

For more information, visit www.eular.org or www.fitforworkeurope.eu.

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Notes to editors

About the Hungarian Association of Rheumatologists

The Hungarian Association of Rheumatologists is one of the oldest European associations in this field as it was established in 1928. HAR promotes high quality standards in rheumatology as a medical profession and as a scientific discipline. Its aim is to provide education, training and support to rheumatologists and allied health professionals. HAR represents and protects the professional and scientific interests of its members.

About the European League Against Rheumatism

The European League Against Rheumatism (EULAR) is the European umbrella organisation which represents scientific societies, health professionals associations and organisations of people with arthritis/rheumatism throughout Europe. At the European level, EULAR is representing the interests of the entire rheumatic disease community and is the natural partner of European policy makers when policies and regulatory frameworks are developed. With 44 scientific member societies, 35 patient organisations coming together under the roof of the Standing Committee of PARE (People with Arthritis/Rheumatism in Europe), several health professionals associations, and corporate members, EULAR underscores the importance of combating rheumatic diseases not only by medical means, but also through a wider context of care for rheumatic patients and a thorough understanding of their social and other needs.

About the Fit for Work Coalition

The Fit for Work Europe Coalition works to promote a multi-stakeholder dialogue on musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) to drive clinical practice and health and work policy that will improve the quality of working life for people with MSDs. Fit for Work is a partnership of organizations and individuals, and enjoys the patronage of The Work Foundation, the UN's Bone and Joint Decade, the European League Against Rheumatism (EULAR) and RAND Europe, and the support of a broad range of stakeholders, including the European Agency for Social Inclusion, the European Federation of Nurses Associations, Association Internationale de la Mutualité, Enterprise for Health, Arthritis Ireland, Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, UniEuropa and more joining every month. The Fit for Work Europe Coalition is supported by an ongoing grant from Abbott - a founding partner - and a supporting grant from GE Healthcare.

Fit for Work reports and position papers have been produced independently by founder organisation The Work Foundation, with full editorial control resting with them alone. For information and the opportunity to comment/blog/share your experience on making Europe Fit for Work, go to www.fitforworkeurope.eu

ⁱ European Commission Disability Strategy 2010-2020 – frequently asked questions (2010)