



European Union Geriatric Medicine Society

European Commission Green Paper

Promoting healthy diets and physical activity: a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic diseases"

Position statement

Introduction

Who are we and what do we stand for?

EUGMS encompasses all the National Societies of Geriatric Medicine in the European Union and EFTA countries. In total this comprises 14,000 doctors whose main activity is to lead the multidisciplinary treatment and care of frail older people. This document sets out EUGMS' comments on the above Commission proposal.

EUGMS maintains that the fact that more and more people live longer, healthier and more active lives is one of the most powerful success stories of medical, technological, and societal advances of the last decades. However, the serious consequences of the growing number of older people for a number of relevant policy areas in society, including health and healthcare, cannot be overlooked.

For instance, older patients very often do not have access to specialised care and age-discrimination in access to care is extremely relevant to this group.

EUGMS aims to improve the health care of older people across Europe by advancing the knowledge of professionals involved in the care of older people; promoting treatment guidelines and high quality scientific research and engaging with governmental and non-governmental partners within the European Union.

EUGMS develops and supports strategies that promote lifelong healthy diets and adequate physical activity as a primary means to reduce the burden of chronic diseases and of disability in the older population – crucial in view of demographic ageing and the rapidly increasing proportion of care and care expenditure spent on older people.

Healthy lifestyles, based on a life course approach, can help curb this challenge and contribute to quality of life at all ages – also in old age.

Structure of response

This document sets out our comments and suggestions as a contribution to the European-wide stakeholder consultation. Firstly, some general comments will be made, followed by more specific comments. The headings in this second part reflect the headings of the Commission Green Paper.

General comments:

First and foremost, EUGMS would like to wholeheartedly welcome the Commission's initiative in addressing this vital area in the health arena. The Paper addresses and emphasizes two paramount interventions to promote healthy aging – which constitutes one of the most crucial challenges to EU governments at this point in time – i.e. healthy diet and physical activity. Therefore, we would suggest that the title of the Paper could reflect this¹.*

Furthermore, the opportunity for all stakeholders to input the process of developing a strategy as well as in its future implementation bears witness to the fact that the Commission intends to actively engage with stakeholders – as stated in the Green Paper



European Union Geriatric Medicine Society

However, there seems to be a one-sided approach to this initiative. When reading the first part of the title of the document, EUGMS was expecting a paper which would focus on nutrition and healthy diets in the wider sense; however, it is clear that the Paper focuses on obesity only. Of course, the importance of obesity and its negative consequences for the individual as well as for society as a whole cannot be emphasized strongly enough. This condition is also becoming a problem in the older population and it is rapidly becoming a serious threat to healthy aging, and specific strategies to address obesity in old age are also required.

However, we cannot help but feel that healthy diets encompasses more than obesity alone. Regrettably, there is no mention or acknowledgement of the importance of malnutrition, which renders the Paper slightly imbalanced.

Like obesity, malnutrition is highly prevalent, particularly in older populations - and even more specifically in health care institutions, such as nursing homes and hospitals. It is self-evident however, that healthy diets (and physical activity) have a positive effect on the quality of life, well-being and life expectancy of people of all ages.

In other words, in response to the Commission's question at the end of the Green Paper in relation to questions on issues not raised by the Green paper, EUGMS would like to stress that malnutrition is another side of the coin in relation to healthy diets. We would consider it a missed opportunity if this important -and growing - condition would not be recognized in a future EU strategy in relation to healthy diets.

Specific comments

I. State of play at EU level

I.1. EUGMS welcomes the Commission's statement that unhealthy diets and lack of physical activity are the leading causes of avoidable illness and premature death in Europe. However, we would like to add that unhealthy diets also contribute to the rising prevalence of malnutrition across Europe.

I.3. The intention to mainstream the notion of healthy diets into a variety of relevant policies at the European level is very positive, since it is obvious that there are many factors impacting on nutrition and healthy lifestyles. A multi-faceted approach is indispensable.

I.7. The Commission states that a number of Member States are already implementing national strategies or action plans in the field of diet, physical activity and health, and that EU action may support and complement these activities, promote their coordination, and help to identify and disseminate good practice, so that other countries can benefit from experience gained. EUGMS would like to make a strong plea to also include exchange activities relating to malnutrition in this respect.

II. Health and Wealth

II.1. Under this heading, mention is made of the human suffering and the economic consequences of the increasing incidence of obesity. EUGMS maintains that the same holds true with respect to malnutrition.

II.2 and II.3. The Commission refers to studies carried out by the Swedish Institute of Public Health and the Netherlands Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM), which concludes that in the EU, 4.5% of disability-adjusted life years (DALYs)

EUGMS Secretariat – Marjory Warren House, 31 St John's Square, London EC1M 4DN

Tel: +44 (0)20 7608 1369 – Fax: +44 (0)20 7608 1041

Email: secretariat@eugms.org – Website: www.eugms.org



European Union Geriatric Medicine Society

are lost due to poor nutrition. We wonder if these studies only focused only on obesity or whether it indeed focused on poor nutrition in a more general sense – including malnutrition.

IV. Structures and tools at Community level

The Commission outlines various structures that have been set up on the area of healthy lifestyles, such as the European Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health, the European Network on Nutrition and Physical Activity and the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). In addition, it underlines various actions that are/could be taken as part of the EU Public Health Action Programmes and other EU policies and initiatives.

While EUGMS agrees that these structures and initiatives are useful, we would like to stress the need for these to include issues relating to malnutrition, as is currently not the case; the notion of healthy diets should address both sides of the spectrum and not focus on obesity alone.

The first evaluation of the European Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health Platform, scheduled for 2006, provides an excellent opportunity to review the actions undertaken and to ensure that malnutrition will be added to its remit.

V. Areas for action

EUGMS agrees with the Commission that information, advertising and marketing should empower people of all ages to make informed choices regarding their diet. Information about the nutritional content of products is an important element in this respect. However, we would like to underline that not all people are in a position to make informed choices, such as those dependent on the care of others (both in institutional settings as well as at home). Malnutrition is on the rise, particularly in institutional care settings, and with the growing number of dependent (older) people, this is rapidly becoming a serious issue.

V.3.1. The Commission underlines the importance of focusing on children and adolescents, since important lifestyle choices - pre-determining health risks at adult age - are made during this period of life. While we agree, we would like to stress that health promotion campaigns are important for all age groups and that lifestyle changes can be effectuated and beneficial at any age.

V.8.2. EUGMS welcomes the Commission statement that approaches aimed at promoting healthy diets 'need to be sensitive to gender, socio-economic and cultural differences, and need to include a life-course perspective'.

V.9. The Commission refers to various initiatives aimed at developing recommendations for nutrient intakes and for the development of food-based dietary guidelines. As above, all of these are to be welcomed, provided they focus on all aspects of healthy diets and not only on obesity.

Conclusion

EUGMS aims to improve the health care of older people across Europe by advancing the knowledge of professionals involved in the care of older people; promoting treatment guidelines and high quality scientific research and engaging with governmental and non-governmental partners within the European Union. This also applies in the area of nutrition, and therefore we would like to act as a resource for the



European Union Geriatric Medicine Society

European Union in health care planning and the promotion of health initiatives for older people.

'the title could be 'promoting healthy diets and physical activity: a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity, chronic diseases and the promotion of healthy aging'.

This paper represents the views of its author on the subject. These views have not been adopted or in any way approved by the Commission and should not be relied upon as a statement of the Commission's or Health & Consumer Protection DG's views. The European Commission does not guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this paper, nor does it accept responsibility for any use made thereof.