

MEMORANDUM TO THE COMMISSION

COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL AND THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

on a European initiative on Alzheimer's disease and other dementias

On 05 November 2008 a Proposal for a Commission initiative on Alzheimer was included in the Commission work programme as a priority action . The Council of Ministers of Health adopted last 15th December 2008 the '**Council Conclusions on public health strategies to combat neurodegenerative diseases associated with ageing and in particular Alzheimer's disease**' stressing the importance of a shared responsibility between Member States and the Commission in launching initiatives covering public health, social protection and research domains in order to stress the importance of ageing in dignity and without diseases.

Several Commission documents concerning Alzheimer and other dementias already stressed the importance of these diseases in the EU and the need of a public health action from the Commission. Article 152 of the EC Treaty provides that Community action is to complement national policies and be directed towards improving public health, preventing human illness and diseases, and obviating sources of danger to human health. Community action in the field of public health shall respect the responsibilities of the Member States for the organisation and delivery of health services and medical care.

The Work Plan for 2005 for the implementation of the programme of Community action in the field of public health (2003-2008)¹, included for the first time a specific reference to the need of information and definition of indicators on the prevalence, treatments, risk factors, risk reduction strategies, cost of illness and social support as well as what constitutes a "healthy brain lifestyle" related to Alzheimer disease (AD) and other dementias. The White Paper COM(2007) 630 final "Together for Health: A Strategic Approach for the EU 2008-2013" of 23 October 2007 developing the EU Health Strategy² also identifies the better understanding of neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's as important needs to address. The European Commission's FP7 (2007-2013)³ emphasized collaborative research with a specific sub activity on "Research on the brain and related diseases, human development and ageing". Particular emphasis will be placed on translational research, for bringing knowledge from bench to bedside and for development of new drug targets. In addition to the proposed budget increase for European research in FP7 compared to FP6, it is expected that FP7 will offer a broad range of possibilities to address Alzheimer disease research at the EU level.

Better information and data on incidence, prevalence, risk factors, early detection, fight against stigma, medical treatment, situation of caregivers, etc. and better knowledge on national approaches to the dementias problem have been identified by the project EuroCode (European Collaboration on Dementia)⁴ coordinated by Alzheimer Europe, selected for funding in 2005 by the Public Health Programme that will finish in July 2009. The conclusions were presented during the recent European Conference on Alzheimer and related diseases (30-31 October 2008) under French Presidency.

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_programme/howtoapply/proposal_docs/workplan2005_en.pdf

² See http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_overview/strategy/health_strategy_en.htm

³ http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/home_en.html

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_projects/2005/action1/action1_2005_10_en.htm

The conclusions of the 'Dementia in Europe Yearbook' 2006 and 2007 from Alzheimer Europe with the support of the European Commission will also provide European overviews of the prevalence of dementia, the reimbursement systems for anti-dementia drugs and the provision of home care, as well as a detailed description of these findings for 31 European countries (the 27 Member States of the European Union and Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Turkey). All these conclusions, as well as those from the Council from December 2008, will serve as basis for the future initiatives of the Commission in the field.

Dementia, the degenerative decline in cognitive function, affects mainly, but not only, those aged 60 years and above. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form in the EU (more than 50% of cases). With the increasing proportion of elderly in most populations, will also come the rise in the number of patients suffering from dementia; a future two-fold increase is forecasted for every twenty years. It is thus ever more pertinent to address the need for action in this field.

It is also estimated that 19 Million Europeans are directly concerned with the disease on a daily basis. Furthermore, there exist unequal levels of care, support and funding over the EU27 and often uncoordinated research efforts. Moreover, a large majority of the genetic component of Alzheimer's disease has yet to be characterised and thus tools for diagnosis and treatment remain limited. It also conjectured that only half the patients in the EU suffering from the disease have been diagnosed, for reasons including lack of awareness by patients of their disorder, diagnostic difficulties and difficulty in obtaining reliable data.

This Commission Communication would be a formal statement of the Commission's support to Member States in areas of public health, social protection, research, and legal rights in order to ensure coherent overall actions. This Communication would be adopted jointly with a proposal from the Directorate-General for Research for a Council Recommendation for Joint Programming of research in the field neurodegenerative disease, including Alzheimer's disease and dementia.

Further actions would be supported within the scope of currently available programmes and resources, in particular through the current Health Programme and the Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development. Cooperative actions between several Member States implementing this Communication could be achieved through voluntary participation in a Joint Action financed under the Health Programme.

The Communication would ensure that the process would have the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, recognizing the relevant issues regarding Alzheimer's disease at European level. Thorough knowledge on the magnitude, prevalence, and incidence of the disease would be achieved. This would provide a solid basis for planning prevention, early intervention and health and social care provision. Such an action could contribute to reducing the inequity gap of healthcare service provision and best practice in primary prevention. The technical work involved, coordinated notably through the relevant strands of the Mental Health Pact, would be subsidized by the EU through support from the existing Health Programme and Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development. By centralising efforts, this will be more efficient and less burdensome for national health systems and public authorities.

The Commission is therefore requested:

- to adopt the attached proposal for a Communication;

- to transmit it to the Council, the European Parliament, the Committee of Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee.