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European Union Geriatric Medicine Society

Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations" European Commission Green Paper (March 2005)

EUGMS position statement

The EUGMS encompasses all the National Societies of geriatric medicine experts in the European Union and EFTA countries. In total this comprises 14,000 doctors whose main activity is the specialist care of older people.

We write to express our appreciation for the consultation which was recently launched in relation to the above Green Paper, and for the opportunity to share our views on the challenges brought about by current demographic developments in Europe.

Having carefully read the document, EUGMS welcomes the Commission's clear recognition of the changes, brought about by the ageing of society, which need to be taken into account when developing policies for the short and longer term future. Demographic developments have their impact in a variety of areas of society; therefore, a number of different policy areas will need to be adapted and be in synergy with one another.

While we share this general recognition and the Commission's intention to address these issues in a consistent manner involving stakeholders, the specifics of the Green Paper give rise to three main causes for concern.

First of all, the Green Paper's underlying message seems to be that older people represent a major *burden* to society. In our opinion, this is too one-sided. While EUGMS recognizes the potential impact of the ageing of society in relation to structure and financing of health and social security systems as well as the labour market, we would like to strongly underline that the increasing number of older people represents a major societal accomplishment.

Improved living conditions, better health care and medical developments have caused this increase in older people, and this should be valued as a positive development; it is the single most impressive development of the last 100 years. Many older people are indeed enjoying good health and functional autonomy and can valuably participate in social and working life. Therefore, older people do not only receive from society; they also contribute to society, as carers (for their grandchildren, children and spouses), as volunteers (e.g. in schools and sport clubs) and, increasingly, as older workers (with a lot of expertise, etc).

Flexible retirement ages (abolishing the mandatory - outdated - retirement age), possibilities for gradual retirement and part-time jobs and improved health and safety conditions in the workplace can further stimulate labour market participation of older workers, and future labour market policy measures should take account of this need. Indeed, measures enabling older workers to retire

early have not had the desired outcome, i.e. a positive effect on job creation for younger people.

Secondly, and relating to the first issue, the Green Paper seems to seek all answers to the challenges in the investment in youth, even where solidarity between the generations is mentioned. For instance, mention is made of the age discrimination that young people may experience due to lack of experience. No mention however is made by the severe age-discrimination experienced by older people in almost any area of society. While the youth has the future, other generations should not be forgotten. Every generation has a contribution to make to this changing society, and generations will need to work together to ensure changes are for the better. For instance, improving health care systems ensuring functional autonomy at *any* age can make a major difference to the contribution a person can make to society.


Thirdly, the emphasis seems to be on the need to stimulate care provision by families. It is clear that care provision by families – still the main providers of care across the European Union and one of the pillars of care provision for the very old - is severely under threat, due to a number of causes. Fewer children, increasing labour market participation by women, greater mobility (i.e. more distance between children and parents) and higher divorce rates (splitting up families) all have their part to play. The Green Paper mainly focuses on the need to put measures in place which would make it easier for couples to have more children.

While EUGMS appreciates the crucial importance of *informal* care (and indeed, the contribution of older people to this care provision – many caregivers are over 65 themselves), we would like to emphasise the need for putting in place appropriate *formal* care systems, which is important to help families to be able to provide care in the changing society scenario and is necessary for the older people who do not have the possibility to receive any informal support. Research has shown that across the board access to specialized geriatric care can make an enormous contribution to both the quality of life of older people and their carers as well as to the sustainability and efficacy of health care systems. The attached document provides an outline of our principles in this respect.

All the challenges outlined in the Green Paper should in our opinion be addressed at European Union level. All Member States are facing the same challenges and can learn from each others' – good and bad – experiences. The Open Method of Coordination, already effective in areas such as employment, social exclusion and pensions and currently being extended to cover the area of health and long term care, will be a useful tool in this, and we wholeheartedly support efforts to streamline these processes in order to ensure a consistent approach and effective policy development.

In conclusion, we would like to reiterate our thanks to the Commission for providing the opportunity to share some of our views, and we would appreciate the possibility to participate in the July conference, where the outcome of this consultation and the Commission's views will be debated.

Yours sincerely



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