EU Allergy and Asthma Network marks its achievements

The Global Allergy and Asthma European Network (GA²LEN), established in 2005 to facilitate excellence in allergy research across clinical and research institutions in Europe, has recently published a report on its major achievements.

Funded by the EU, GA²LEN is composed of a multidisciplinary research network centred on scientific projects in allergy and asthma. It integrates research on allergies across Europe and speeds up the dissemination of research results to health-care professionals, policy makers, patients and the public.

For policy makers, GA²LEN’s research highlights the need to consider complementary issues, such as health actions to support quality of life, information on behaviour change and services, such as pollen forecasting, when developing regulations to reduce environmental allergy stressors, for example, pollen loads.

Allergies and asthma are significant global health issues. In the EU, for example, it is estimated that 35 per cent of the working population in the EU suffer from allergies and that half of all EU citizens will suffer from some form of allergy by 2050. Throughout the world, the incidence of allergic diseases, such as asthma, allergic rhinitis (inflammation and irritation of the membranes of the nose and eyes) and eczema are increasing and top the list of long-term diseases in Europe.

Many patients are under-diagnosed and under-treated, affecting their work, school and social life. For the health-care system, the direct costs can be substantial. For example, daily treatment of allergic rhinitis costs around €0.3-0.5 a day, whilst treatment of severe allergic asthma (as a result of earlier under-treatment) can cost over €30 a day. Indirect costs, due to lost working hours, can add up to €50 a day. Early diagnosis and treatment is therefore important for many reasons.

One of the main objectives of GA²LEN has been to develop a durable infrastructure to enable future research into allergic diseases. This support now includes a secure web platform for safe data and knowledge transfer and storage; knowledge on biobanking, the processing and storing biological materials; a clinical support platform for high quality clinical trials; administrative support for partners; and synchronising research efforts among partners.

In addition, a number of research projects have been undertaken. These include:

- a unique study on birth cohorts (following the same people over a period of time), which has combined data from many European birth cohort studies about asthma and allergic diseases into one database so that risk factors can be identified. The database includes around 41,420 participants, from 20 centres in nine countries and has initially analysed the effects of keeping pets on allergy diseases.
- population studies on the effects of air pollution on human health, including exposure to traffic emissions
- the impacts of occupational exposure to allergens and irritants, such as cleaning agents, on asthma and rhinitis

The authors write that continued use of the GA²LEN infrastructure will help to lower the socioeconomic costs of allergies and asthma in the EU.

1. GA²LEN (Global Allergy and Asthma European Network) was supported by the European Commission under the Sixth Framework Programme. See: www.ga2len.net

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