EHFG 2011: STAYING YOUNG – WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM OUR FRIENDS

With the prospect of over-60s for the first time outnumbering Europeans of working age next year, the European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing is about to choose its first priority actions, coordinating the work of stakeholders across Europe. The European Health Forum Gastein today heard details of the ambitious COURAGE project to develop, by intense study of three countries, more scientifically exact measures of health and health-related outcomes. The meeting also heard a plea from Brussels-based AGE Platform Europe for the forgotten army of informal carers – 80% of the total – who are themselves becoming old and helpless.

Bad Hofgastein, October 5, 2011 – The European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing, which is part of the EU's Innovation Union Strategy, one of the Europe 2020 flagship initiatives, is to confront the problems posed by Europe's lopsided demography. Stakeholders, backed by the European Commission, are expected to implement by late 2013 the priority actions being chosen this autumn.

The Commission is especially keen on social innovation in health, and improving access for patients to their health data. "At the core of the European partnership lies the anticipation of a new paradigm: demographic ageing as an opportunity, not a challenge," said Robert Madelin, the European Commission's Director General for the Information Society, speaking at the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG). "With the current debt crisis, public services are under pressure to deliver more for less. The partnership aims to improve the sustainability and efficiency of our health care and social security systems. We have to make this a reality. We owe it not just to our ageing population but also to the younger generations. Accelerating innovations which help our elderly to live more independent, active and healthier lives are obviously a great step towards giving elderly people the quality of life they deserve."

"By the end of this decade, around a third of all Europeans will be 65 years old or over. Our aim is to bring together all actors to invest their know how to make lives not just longer but better. We want all those involved in technology and health to join forces so that our population's lives are spent as healthy, active and fulfilling as possible," said Paola Testori-Coggi, Director General for Health & Consumers, European Commission. "The [European Innovation Partnership](#) is the European Commission's answer to the challenge of developing innovative ways of improving the quality of life for our ageing population, and enabling people to stay active longer. Our aim is to harness continuously evolving technology for practical applications in people's daily lives. Our ultimate objective is a set of real applications that will improve people's lives in Europe and will lead by example worldwide."

A EHFG session organized by the European Commission heard from a number of stakeholders in a discussion aimed at generating ideas and guidelines. Dr Matilde Leonardi of the Fondazione IRCCS Istituto Neurologico Carlo Besta, Milan, said it was vital to get the

science right: "Europe's ageing population creates some of the most pressing health and social policy challenges of this century. To prepare for these changes and propose innovative responses, it is essential to develop measurement tools to collect valid and comparable longitudinal data on the interaction between health status, quality of life, and well-being in order to create an empirical basis for health and social policy development and analysis."

Over-60s overtake the number of Europeans of working age

The three-year EU COURAGE in Europe project (http://www.courageineurope.eu), coordinated by her institute, with 11 partners from Italy, Spain, Finland, Poland and the WHO, is developing and testing a tool to evaluate the environmental and social determinants of health and disability in ageing. "The resulting data will not only provide more reliable and relevant ageing prevalence trends – to anticipate and prepare policy responses to ageing trends – but also to demonstrate the crucial role that determinants such as features of the built environment and social networks has on the quality of life and well-being of Europeans as they age," she told the meeting.

Anne-Sophie Parent, Secretary-General of AGE Platform Europe welcomed the European Commission's push for better coordination of national resources at a time when the number of over-60s was about to overtake the number of Europeans of working age, and there was ever-great pressure on national resources.

The forgotten 80% of carers – who will care for them?

"The implications of demographic change for Europe combined with today's economic crisis are only now sinking in, and the Commission initiative's is very timely," said Ms Parent. "One point often forgotten in this debate is that health and care workers are themselves getting older. Even more striking, but usually overlooked, is the fact that 80% of care for the elderly is now provided by informal carers and this is expected to increase given the drastic cuts in public support."

"They are often old themselves, but carry on well past retirement age. They are the forgotten ones, for the most part left on their own to provide care to their loved ones at the detriment of their own health and well-being. It is time that solutions are implemented to help older people take better care of themselves and their older relatives and friends," according to Anne-Sophie Parent.

The EHFG is the most important conference on health care policy in the EU. This year it attracted more than 600 decision-makers from 45 countries for discussions on the latest developments in health care policy.

EHFG Forum 1 "The European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing". 5 October 2011