On the occasion of World Digestive Health Day 2013:

“The importance of research into liver cancer and alcohol as a risk factor”

Introduction

On May 29 2013 EASL and UEG organised the event “The importance of research into liver cancer and alcohol as a risk factor” on the occasion of World Digestive Health Day. The event took place in the Fondation Universitaire opposite the European Commission Directorate General (DG) for Innovation & Research and near the European Parliament. The host for this meeting was Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Karin Kadenbach from Austria. She is a member of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats (S&D). She moderated the event together with Mr Giulio Gallo from the European Commission (DG SANCO).

The event was attended by MEPs, several European Commission officials, a representative from the WHO Europe Office and other stakeholders in the field with an interest in liver cancer and EU alcohol policy and research.

This document will provide the reader a full overview of the presentations and the discussions that took place during the event.

Karin Kadenbach MEP – Welcome

MEP Kadenbach made a firm opening statement in which she highlighted the low survival rate for patients diagnosed with liver cancer. Ms Kadenbach explained that currently in 70% to 90% of all liver cancer cases, patients have less than 5% chance to survive for more than five years after diagnosis.

Hence, she called upon the European community to invest more resources in the development of new treatment methods and the discovery of simpler and better detection instruments to give liver cancer patients a fair chance in their fight for survival.
Mrs Kadenbach also commented extensively on alcohol-related problems. In addition to highlighting alcohol as a risk factor for liver cancer and other diseases of the digestive system, Mrs Kadenbach referred to traffic accidents and violence as two other societal problems where alcohol often plays a prominent role.

One important solution for many of the alcohol-related problems was in her view the Scottish minimum unit pricing initiative. According to Mrs Kadenbach this public health measure should also be considered by other countries, including her own, in combination with increasing the amount of awareness campaigns and implementing stricter advertising rules for alcoholic beverages.

In conclusion she focused on the high financial impact of alcohol on society. She stated that in the European Union €125 billion are spent annually on the negative side effects of alcohol abuse.

Professor Markus Peck-Radosavljevic, EASL Secretary General – “The importance of research into liver disease”

Professor Markus Peck started his inspiring presentation by sharing highlights from the new EASL publication published in February 2013 – on the burden of liver disease in Europe. He informed the audience that the review showed that 29 million Europeans are estimated to suffer from a chronic liver condition while all major causes of liver diseases are amenable to prevention and treatment. After presenting these highlights, he called upon the EU decision makers to develop the urgently needed strategies to reduce the burden of liver disease in Europe.

In the course of his presentation he elaborated on liver cancer, liver cirrhosis and two of its main risk factors: hepatitis B and C. Probably the most striking slide Prof Peck shared with the audience illustrated the number of deaths throughout Europe related to liver cirrhosis. It showed the wide gap in mortality from liver cirrhosis between Central and Eastern EU countries including the Baltic States on the one hand and the Western EU member states on the other hand. Especially in Hungary and Romania the mortality rates for males per 100,000 are excessive (100 in Hungary and 64 in Romania). In total 84,697 EU citizens die annually because of liver cirrhosis.

1 For the full review see: http://www.easl.eu/assets/application/files/54ae845caec619f_file.pdf
At the end of his presentation Prof Peck referred to the upcoming publication of HEPAMAP in November 2013. HEPAMAP is the roadmap for liver research and it aims to highlight needs/gaps in liver disease research.

Mr Giulio Gallo, Policy Officer, Unit of Health determinants (DG Health and Consumer Policy) – “The European Commission and liver cancer - an overview”

Mr Giulio Gallo began his presentation by giving an overview of the alcohol related deaths for men and women all across Europe per country, in the age group 15-64. It appeared that particularly men in the Baltic States are affected. In Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania more than 25% of all deaths were related to alcohol within the mentioned age category. Although lower rates were measured in the rest of Europe, the graph still revealed an overall average of 14%.

As one of the causes for this significant health problem, Mr Gallo referred to a lack of awareness among the European population about the dangers of excessive alcohol consumption. Only 36% of the European population for example is fully aware of the strong relationship between alcohol and cancer.

To improve the aforementioned statistics, Mr Gallo referred to the many initiatives that are being- or have been undertaken at the EU level. He particularly highlighted the EU Alcohol Strategy, the revision of the European Code Against Cancer, the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7)/Horizon 2020 and the European Partnership for Action Against Cancer. As a concrete example of the resources attributed to alcohol-related diseases at the EU level, he mentioned the seventh framework programme which attributed € 25 million to research on liver diseases.

Dr Marsha Morgan, UCL Institute for Liver & Digestive Health – “The strong relationship between alcohol and liver cancer”

In a very clear and concise presentation Dr Morgan described the strong link between the different risk factors and liver cancer. She emphasized obesity/diabetes type 2 as a cause of liver cancer besides alcohol and Hepatitis B&C which were already mentioned by previous speakers. She informed the audience that the contribution of obesity/diabetes type 2 to liver cancer mortality is still unknown, but could be significant.
In the second part of her presentation Dr Morgan gave more attention to the different phases the liver goes through as a consequence of excessive alcohol consumption. At this point she stressed that occasional higher (but not excessive) amounts of alcohol consumption could normally be coped with by the liver, while continuous high intake posed a real threat to it. Dr Morgan explained that high amounts of alcohol can in a first phase result in alcoholic hepatitis, in the second stage cause alcohol cirrhosis which again in 20% of the cases leads to liver cancer. An intake of 60g of pure alcohol per day can already be sufficient to develop this disease.

Dr Morgan concluded her presentation by giving a number of noteworthy facts with regards to alcohol consumption and the incidence of liver cirrhosis and cancer. Hence, she informed the audience about the increasing rates of cirrhosis in Eastern and Northern Europe while incidence in Southern Europe is declining. Furthermore, 55 million European adults are drinking alcohol at harmful levels while on a global scale 350 million people are infected with Hepatitis B. Finally, she highlighted the excessive risk of being diagnosed with liver cancer when combining different risk factors such as being obese while at the same time drinking continuously high amounts of alcohol.

Questions & Answers

Commenting on Dr Marsha Morgan’s presentation, Professor Markus Peck stressed the need to also take into account the drinking age and the sort of beverages youngsters are mainly consuming. Only then we would be able to think about effective policy measures to reduce excessive drinking within this group.

Dr Marsha Morgan considered higher taxation to be a good instrument to reduce alcohol abuse.

Professor Peck reflected on the possibility of making alcohol less accessible. In some Scandinavian countries for example, this policy has been proven relatively successful.

Mr Giulio Gallo remarked that especially alcohol related advertisements are influencing teenagers. He would consequently be in favour of stricter regulations.
Professor Reinhold Stockbrügger, Chair UEG Public Affairs Committee – “The strong link between alcohol and digestive diseases”

After introducing UEG, Professor Stockbrügger widened the scope of the debate by making the audience aware that drinking is not only damaging for the liver, but for the entire digestive tract.

The focus in fighting the negative side effects of alcohol consumption should, according to him, lie on healthcare professionals and youngsters. Healthcare professionals should receive more information about treating patients with alcohol-related problems, while youngsters should be better made aware of the negative side effects of high alcohol intake.

Prof Stockbrügger continued his presentation by describing the important role UEG and its members play in tackling liver and other digestive diseases. He described the educational and public affairs activities of UEG at the EU level and presented its funding activities to support alcohol related research. Prof Stockbrügger also discussed UEG’s activities within the “EU Alcohol and Health Forum” under the guidance of the UEG representative Professor Matthias Löhr from the Karolinska Institute.

At the end of his presentation he called for a European Cancer Institute, similar to the National Cancer Institute in the USA, to coordinate and stimulate cancer research in Europe.

Ms Tatjana Reic, President European Liver Patients Association (ELPA) – “Living in the shadow of liver cancer - a patient perspective”

During a moving presentation Ms Tatjana Reic shared her personal story as a hepatitis C patient. She was infected with the Hepatitis C virus in her younger years when it was still unknown to the medical community.

When discussing the risk factors for this disease she explicitly referred to alcohol which, in her opinion, is one of the most important risk factors for being diagnosed with this disease.

Even though the virus is now preventable and treatable, Ms Reic emphasized the need for continuous research as, according to the WHO, worldwide annually more than 750,000 people die from this disease while in total 350 million people are infected.

In addition to research Ms Reic brought free check-ups forward as another crucial tool to reduce the incidence and mortality of this highly infectious virus. Currently, 90% of Hepatitis cases remain undiagnosed.
Dr Ciarán Nicholl, Joint Research Centre – “European Commission’s joint research - new role in cancer policy support”

Dr Ciarán Nicholl introduced the Joint Research Centre (JRC) as the European Commission in-house science service which supports the Commission in developing evidence based policies. Currently the JRC consists of 7 institutes in 5 member states, has 2,900 staff members and an annual budget of € 360 million.

The activities of his unit- Public Health Policy Support- are mainly focusing on cancer policy support, nutrition behavioural science, medical devices and rare diseases. One of his unit’s main projects in the forthcoming years will be to maintain and further develop the European Cancer Registries data in close collaboration with a large number of stakeholders such as the European Partnership for Action Against Cancer.

Another project of the JRC and his unit in particular will be the establishment of an EU platform for rare diseases. Dr Nicholl stated that there is a strong need for standardisation and harmonisation in this field.

Professor Michael Manns, Common EASL-UEG representative to the Biomed Alliance – “Role of the Biomed Alliance in fostering liver cancer research”

Professor Michael Manns’ presentation concentrated on the necessity to establish a more permanent scientific steering panel at the EU level that would support the decision makers in setting the right priorities in biomedical research. This future institution will, if established, accelerate excellent biomedical research, address the gaps in the innovation cycle and facilitate cross-talk and collaboration across disciplines.

At the same time it will contribute to coping with a number of social and economic challenges such as the ageing EU population, shrinking workforce and increasing competition from, in particular, China and India.

The rest of Prof Manns’ presentation focused on the topic of the day, “liver cancer”. In addition to emphasizing the key messages of the previous speakers, he highlighted that liver cancer is worldwide the 3rd most deadly cancer with the possibility to rank higher in the future as incidence continues to increase. To stop this alarming trend he called for additional measures to detect liver cancer at a curable stage while in parallel developing better therapies for advanced stage liver cancer.
Discussion

During the discussion, Professor Reinhold Stockbrügger stressed the need for an increased focus on primary prevention within universities and beyond. Consequently, he suggested each medical university hospital to have a department focusing on primary prevention.

Dr Marsha Morgan supported Professor Stockbrügger and declared that the different problems in relation to alcohol should be dealt with in parallel and not separately. An all-encompassing approach is in her view necessary.

Mr Giulio Gallo emphasized the topic of food labelling in the discussion. According to him alcoholic beverages should also have labels which indicate their ingredients, as is commonly done in the food industry.

Mr GiulioGallo, Closing remarks

As a co-moderator Mr Gallo summed up the main discussion points of the day. He concluded that everybody in the room agreed on the importance of taking more actions against excessive drinking while in parallel increasing the funding in health research. He finally thanked the speakers for their contributions and EASL, UEG and the European Parliament for organising the event.

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June 18, 2013, Brussels