

# Taking action against Alzheimer's disease

Contributed by Euregha

On the 22nd July 2009, the European Commission adopted concrete proposals to tackle Alzheimer's disease, dementias and other neurodegenerative conditions. These shared health and social challenges in Europe call for coordinated actions to ensure efficient prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care for those affected.

European countries are also invited to pool their resources and better coordinate their research efforts in the field of neurodegenerative diseases, and Alzheimer's in particular, by programming their research investments jointly for the first time, instead of each separately. There are currently over seven million people with Alzheimer's disease and related disorders in Europe and it is predicted that this number will double in the next 20 years. It is vital to plan, invest and cooperate in this field today both to control the social costs of these diseases as well as to offer hope, dignity and healthier lives to the millions of sufferers and their families. Today's actions mark important new steps both in the Commission's 'Europe for Patients campaign' and the new approach of Joint Programming in research.

## Background

Alzheimer's disease and other dementias are part of the broader neurodegenerative diseases. At European level, the European Parliament adopted resolutions in 1996 and 1998 and the Commission's 2007 EU health strategy 'Together for Health' identifies the need to better understand neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's in the context of ageing. In 2008, the Council called on the Commission to produce a plan of action to tackle neurodegenerative diseases and particularly Alzheimer's disease. The Commission funds research projects on Alzheimer's and ND diseases through the 7th Research Framework Programme.

Due to the increasing lifespan and the decreasing ratio of working to retired populations, the social and economic burden of neurodegenerative diseases is growing. In 2005, the total direct and informal care costs of Alzheimer's disease and other dementias were estimated at €130 billion in the EU27 (€21 000 per patient); 56% of these costs was informal care. The most common forms of dementia in the European Union are Alzheimer's disease (about 70% of cases), and vascular dementia (less than 30%).

The objective of this European initiative is to tackle the main problems posed by Alzheimer's disease and dementias in four key areas:

- acting early to diagnose dementia and to reduce the risk of dementia in the first place;
- improving research coordination between EU countries;
- sharing of best practice and
- providing a forum to reflect on rights, autonomy and dignity of patients.

The first Joint Programming initiative to coordinate research on Alzheimer's and other neurodegenerative diseases

Alzheimer's disease and related disorders have been identified by the EU countries as an area where the first Joint Programming of research activities should be launched. Joint Programming addresses EU countries willing to engage in the development of a common Strategic Research Agenda which will allow their participation on a variable geometry basis. 20 countries in Europe have already shown their willingness to pool resources and to conduct research in an area where a common initiative would offer major added value compared with the current, fragmented research efforts in Europe.