

Arthritis and work

The European League Against Rheumatism (EULAR) has called upon the European Union to work with member states to create a comprehensive strategy to tackle rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases (RMDs). The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the risks facing this vulnerable group and, with Europe facing the growing challenges of an ageing population and workforce, it is vital that the EU addresses the hidden costs of workplace exclusion for people suffering one of the more than two hundred diseases under the RMD umbrella.

It is estimated that more than 100 million European citizens, many young and of working age, currently suffer with RMDs. They are the main occupational disease type, accounting for around 60% of all health problems in the workplace, and are the biggest cause of sick leave and premature retirement due to work disability in Europe.

The pandemic has compounded the challenges faced by this vulnerable group in different ways. Some have greater vulnerability to COVID-19 due to being treated with immunosuppressants and steroids or have a common co-morbidity, such as cardiovascular disease, that signify higher risk. RMD sufferers have also been affected by reduced access to medication, or the reprioritisation of healthcare facilities away from people with chronic conditions. Job access and security is also a highly significant concern as RMD sufferers may face potential workplace absenteeism during a global downturn.

Speaking during the EULAR Brussels Forum, a high-level online panel discussion on the "Employment risks and impacts for Europeans with RMDs during the COVID Recession", Professor Iain McInnes, EULAR president, said:

"For many people living with RMDs, job insecurity and unemployment are a daily reality that much of the rest of society only experiences in times of crisis. The pandemic has created new workplace barriers for Europeans with RMDs, but it has also highlighted the opportunities flexible working patterns and digital workplace and healthcare solutions can offer this community."

The exclusion of RMD patients from the workplace costs Europe an estimated €163bn annually. The short-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the longer-term trend of an ageing European population, are expected to dramatically increase this impact without urgent action.



Roberta Metsola, MEP, chair of the European Parliament Interest Group on RMDs, added:

"To support the economic recovery, and ensure that Europe can cope with an ageing population and workforce in the future, the EU must act decisively to develop a comprehensive approach to tackling the hidden human and economic cost of excluding people with RMDs from the workplace. One element of the EU strategy on RMDs must be to ensure that the post-2020 EU disability strategy better responds to the employment needs of people with RMDs, and sets member states clear targets and timelines to ensure adequate resources are available."

Europe needs policies and programmes that create an open, positive and supportive culture between patients, colleagues, and employers; including strong protection against workplace discrimination. It also needs to create ergonomic workplaces to increase comfort and reduce risk of accidents and flares, as well as to promote flexible work schedules and teleworking. The EU should also guide and support the member states as they develop strategies to deliver more effective RMD-related health promotion, prevention, treatment and rehabilitation.

About EULAR

EULAR is a non-profit scientific organisation based in Zurich, Switzerland, representing scientific societies, societies of other health professionals, professional associations and organisations for people with rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases (RMDs).

The aim of EULAR is to reduce the burden of RMDs on the individual and society and to improve the treatment, prevention and rehabilitation of RMDs.

Further information: www.eular.org

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