

PRESS RELEASE

Ten per cent of hospital and primary care expenditure – diseases of the gastrointestinal tract are costly **UEGW press conference: the socio-economic consequences of gastrointestinal diseases are huge!**

(Barcelona, 25 October 2010) Diseases of the gastrointestinal tract, with which many million people in Europe are afflicted and which are often chronic, represent a big socio-economic problem. This is because treatments are often protracted and account for around ten per cent of hospital costs in Europe. The consequence of these chronic ailments – such as loss of employment – are a considerable burden to social security budgets, which add to the direct costs. This statement was made by Prof. Lars Agréus of the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Sweden, on the occasion of the 18th United European Gastroenterology Week (UEGW) in Barcelona. The UEGW is the largest European congress of its discipline in Europe.

So-called “functional disorders”, for which no organic causes are found and which manifest themselves as recurring digestive disorders, for example irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), are very widespread, a true public health problem. In primary care, Prof. Lars Agréus estimates that approximately one in three adults in Europe is affected at some stage. “The quality of life of these patients is impaired to an extent comparable with that caused by a stomach ulcer or chronic intestinal disease, as well as severe cardiac heart failure or other severe disorders,” said Prof. Agréus at the UEGW press conference.

Irritable bowel syndrome reacts to different kind of foods and causes pain, flatulence and disturbed bowel habits

Fifteen per cent of the adult population suffer from IBS symptoms according to expert estimates. Persons affected complain of cramp-like abdominal pain, malaise, flatulence, diarrhoea and/or constipation. The cause of IBS is assumed to be an over-sensitive bowel surface and bowel muscles which can react violently to the minor irritation from different foods but also from chronic stress or negative psychological situations. The use of medication frequently does not achieve much in the way of results; anti-depressants are sometimes used, as many patients also suffer anxiety and depression.

Relaxation techniques, hypnotherapy and acupuncture can be used for these conditions to alleviate pain and achieve improved overall well-being. Prof. Agréus, “Treatment success rates need to be improved to enable patients to participate in everyday life again. This is frequently not possible due to their burden of disease.”

2.5 million Europeans affected by inflammatory bowel diseases

The same goes for patients suffering from chronic inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), the frequency of which is increasing dramatically, especially in young people between 20 and 30 years of age, as well as in children, and by which 2.5 million Europeans are currently affected. Patients afflicted with IBD suffer from diarrhoea and abdominal pain, often combined with blood in their stools. After years of disease, bowel operations are often inevitable; the risk of developing cancer also rises. The physical activity of many of those affected is often severely restricted as a consequence, and they subsequently also withdraw socially as a result. “Thirty to forty per cent lose their employment as a result of their illness and its consequences; those affected at a young age often have to break off their school or university studies or vocational training and increasingly isolate themselves at home over time,” explained Prof. Agréus.

Delayed or false diagnosis also impairs therapy

Prof. Agréus complained that although it was possible to alleviate the symptoms, especially with the new anti-inflammatory medication (‘Biologicals’), too much time often elapsed until suitable measures were initiated. “Knowledge of chronic inflammatory diseases is still inadequate in the population, but unfortunately also with doctors. Delayed or even false diagnoses therefore often ensue, resulting in non-optimum therapy.” Delays prior to the introduction of effective therapy can trigger irreversible damage and furthermore necessitate far-reaching operations. UEGF expert Agréus said, “High indirect costs resulting from incapacity and social benefit payments are incurred in addition to the direct management costs. Usually, these surpass the direct costs by a significant degree.”

Intensive research efforts required

According to Prof. Agréus, this needed not be the case if it were possible to intensify research efforts and to improve the ability to deal with these conditions in the general population. “Gastro-intestinal diseases represent one of the most important public health problems in Europe. Intensive research campaigns, improved patient care, and more comprehensive provision of information for the population are the most important challenges for the future.”

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