

EASO Second Roundtable on Obesity

Leopold Hotel, Brussels, January 13, 2016

Moderator: John Bowis, Former MEP and Former UK Minister of Health

Speakers:

- **Prof Paolo Sbraccia**, EASO, Societa Italiana dell'Obesità:
The Challenges of Treating Obesity.
- **The Hon Mr Christopher Fearn**, Parliamentary Secretary for Health, Malta:
The Problems of Obesity in a Healthcare System: a Member State Perspective.
- **Joao Breda**, Programme Manager Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity, World Health Organisation:
The Socio-Economic and Cultural Divisions of Obesity.
- **Carlos Oliveira**, President of ADEXO, the Obese Patients Association of Portugal:
Influencing Policy from the Patients' Perspective.
- **Dr Dominique Durrer**, EASO Patient Council:
The Stigma of Obesity: the Patient and Doctor Experience.

Executive summary

The European Association for the Study of Obesity (EASO) hosted the second in a series of roundtable discussions on obesity on 13 January 2016. This was a follow-up to the first roundtable held in Brussels on 13 October 2015.



More than 30 stakeholders took part in the discussion, including medical professionals, patients, representatives from the World Health Organization (WHO), Members from the European Parliament (MEPs), and some of the leading European organisations involved in the many illnesses for which obesity is a gateway disease.

Participants discussed and shared information on the need to urgently address the problems of obesity at European and Member State level and agreed that EASO will draw up a consensus statement on the need for obesity to be classified as a disease.

Classification as a disease would ensure that much more is done to tackle the problem and would also open the door for obesity to be recognised as a medical specialty.

Garnering support for the consensus statement will be a focal point of the joint activities that the participating disease groups have already agreed to back as part of the awareness and advocacy programme for European Obesity Day 2016 to be held on 21 May.

The roundtable event was enabled with support from Medtronic and Novo Nordisk.

Key points from the speakers



John Bowis said that in the discussion on health promotion and prevention it is important to remember the people who are already facing the challenge of being obese. It is also about how we bring support and help to those who find themselves in that position.

Obesity is not always caused by eating. It can be for genetic and other reasons, he said.

The stigmatisation suffered by people with obesity has to be addressed but so does the self-stigmatisation that they often endure.



Dr Alfred Sant, MEP, said Europe is facing an obesity crisis. Economic development has led to a high standard of living bringing benefits for everyone but obesity is one of the major negative side effects. He said that in response to a parliamentary question he raised, the European Commission had confirmed that in Europe there is a significant correlation between obesity and people in lower socioeconomic groups, particularly women and children.

He said obesity needs urgent attention and political action and must be top of the policymaking agenda. It should be tackled from all angles using a multi-sectorial approach. Significant investment, particularly in research is needed.



Prof Paolo Sbraccia said some effective treatment options are available but better follow-up is required and clinicians require a broader portfolio of drug options to help patients with different types of obesity. He said that access to treatment, particularly reimbursement, needs to be addressed.

He also suggested that a more personalised approach must be taken to patients as simply measuring BMI is not a perfect indicator. It fails to take into account the amount of fat and where it is located.



The Hon Mr Christopher Fearn announced that childhood obesity would be a top health priority during Malta's 2017 presidency of the European Council. This will include a mid-term review of the EU Action Plan on Childhood Obesity, looking at what actions Member States have taken since 2014.

He stressed the importance of starting to treat obesity as a disease. He said the medical profession, medical schools, politicians, scientists and NGOs then need to treat it with the same level of importance as any other disease. He said parliaments should facilitate processes which encourage all ministries to work together to tackle obesity, and that research funding should be considerably increased.

Joao Breda from the World Health Organization congratulated Malta for declaring their intention to put obesity high on the agenda of their EU Presidency. He stressed that according to a WHO study, being overweight is the third most important risk factor in terms of premature deaths due to non-communicable diseases in the world. He also pointed out that one in three children are already obese and that WHO is revising its forecasts which will show that by 2030, half of the world's population will be overweight.

He referred to action plans that are in place, as well as to the excellent childhood obesity monitoring in Europe. But he said that much more needs to be done, especially in the food environment which he said is not protecting us. He suggested that food reformulation needs to be commonplace and not the exception, portion sizes need to be adapted, and physical activity encouraged to a much greater extent. He said we should be bold and committed to improve the situation and that research resources need to be considerably improved.



Dr Roberto Bertollini from the World Health Organization added that WHO already recognises obesity as a significant health problem and as a disease. But he announced that the next revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) will include clearer definitions. However, these are only due to be published in the next two years.



Carlos Oliveira stated that Portugal had estimated the indirect costs of treating the comorbidities of obesity to be €650 million. He said Portugal is one of only two countries that recognise obesity as a chronic disease. He pointed out that until obesity is recognised as a disease there are officially no “patients” and no regulations to protect people.

He suggested that the European Commission’s White Paper on Obesity from 2007¹ should be revised and that it should become a Regulation, recognising obesity as a chronic disease.



Dr Dominique Durrer said that stigma in the medical profession is prevalent and that GPs and healthcare professionals often have a negative view of patients because weight is perceived as something that is under personal control. This exacerbates depression, isolation, eating disorders and further weight gain.

She advocated that much more needs to be done to educate healthcare professionals, pointing out that there have been some very positive results when medical students and doctors have adopted a more positive approach

Additional comments and observations from the roundtable discussion

- **Obesity as a disease**

- **Dr Françoise Klessens-Godfroy**, representing the Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME), called for obesity to be defined as a disease because she said such recognition is needed by doctors.
- **Ellen Govers** from the European Federation of the Association of Dieticians (EFAD), supported the call, stressing that obesity is a disease that causes other diseases.
- **Mieke van Spanje**, Co-chair of the EASO Patient Council Steering Committee said that obesity is a disease but not a self-inflicted one. “We need to support people with obesity whether they actively seek treatment or not. Treatment outcomes should be measured in terms of health, quality of life and reduced risk factors. Not just weight loss,” she said.

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/health/archive/ph_determinants/life_style/nutrition/documents/nutrition_wp_en.pdf

- **Prof Hans Törnblom**, Member of the Public Affairs Committee (PAC), United European Gastroenterologists (UEG), said obesity should be recognised as a disease and a pathophysiological mechanism in the same way that we know that immunologic mechanisms in general are important for a number of diseases. He also agreed that one of the main issues for the medical profession is to take away the stigma and that providing basic health literacy should be given high priority.
- Several participants stated that classification of obesity as a disease would also help in raising awareness and combating stigma. If the EU adopts obesity as a disease it will also be easier for Member States to follow suit.
- **Recognition as a medical specialty**
 - **Dr Grace O'Malley**, Chair of ASOI (the Irish member group of EASO), said healthcare professionals have a huge role to play in the treatment of obesity but the basic standard of education is not available. Training should be developed at all levels and obesity needs to be recognised as a medical specialty.
- **Social aspects**
 - **Mairead McGuinness** MEP said there is no magic bullet for the fight against obesity but that she considers it an extremely important societal issue that must be dealt with. She said people often want help but don't want to be victimised.
- **Legal aspects**
 - **Prof Jens Jordan** said that research does not always translate into action. He gave the example of Germany where there is an abundance of research on obesity but the legal environment makes it difficult for the patient and the medical professionals to treat it. He said the law makes it almost impossible to receive reimbursement for bariatric surgery.
- **The need for research**
 - **Dr Claire Skentelbery**, Secretary General, European Biotechnology Network (EBN), stressed the importance of research and the need for comparative data to provide Member States with evidence of the need to act.
- **European Obesity Day 2016 (EOD)**
 - **Ellen Govers** from the European Federation of the Association of Dieticians (EFAD), suggested that the call for obesity to be recognised as a disease and a consensus paper signed by the participants and other stakeholders, should be a key focus for EOD 2016.

Conclusions and next steps

There was complete agreement among participants that obesity needs to be urgently recognised as a disease. The Hon Mr Christopher Fearn said he had never been to a meeting where so many people were in agreement.

A consensus statement will be drafted and circulated to participants for their approval ahead of the next EASO roundtable discussion on obesity which will take place on 6 April.



At the same time, the European Commission will be asked to provide an update on the status and outcome of the 2007 White Paper *A Strategy for Europe on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity related health issues*.

Educational videos, printed materials, and basic training at all levels aimed at reducing stigma will be considered as priority initiatives by EASO.

Improved health literacy around obesity, addressing cause and effect, will be included in materials to be developed as part of the European Obesity Day campaign.

Details of the proposed initiatives and materials which can be used by disease groups and stakeholders for activities around Obesity Day 2016 will be circulated shortly.

Participants

Name	Title and Organisation
Darren Azzopardi	Obesity Research Officer, Ministry of Social Affairs, Malta
Dr Roberto Bertollini	Chief Scientist and WHO Representative to the European Union
John Bowis	Former MEP and Former UK Minister of Health
Joao Breda	Programme Manager Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity, WHO
Daniel Buhagiar	Assistant to MEP Dr Sant, European Parliament
Dr Laura Capitaine	European Association for the Study of the Liver (EASL)
Rebecca Currie	Senior Global Public Affairs Manager, Novo Nordisk
Sarada Das	EU Senior Policy Advisor, Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME)
Stella de Sabata	Regional Manager, International Diabetes Federation (IDF)
Dr Dominique Durrer	General Practitioner and member of the EASO Patient Council

Valeria Fagone	Senior Director Government Affairs EMEA, Medtronic
The Hon Mr Christopher Fearn	Parliamentary Secretary for Health, Malta
Dr Charmain Gauci	Director Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, Consultant, Public Health Medicine, Malta
Ellen Govers	European Federation of the Association of Dieticians (EFAD)
Geoffrey Henning	Director of Policy, EuropaColon
Prof Jens Jordan	Director, Institute for Clinical Pharmacology, Hannover Medical School, Germany
Dr Françoise Klessens-Godfroy	Member of the Secretariat of the Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME)
Mairead McGuinness	MEP, S&D, Ireland
Anne Meidahl Petersen	EU Adviser, CreoDK
Carlos Oliveira	President, Portuguese Organisation for Obese and Formerly Obese Patients (ADEXO)
Dr Grace O'Malley	Chair of ASOI (the Irish member group of EASO)
Dr Alfred Sant	MEP, S&D, Malta
Prof Paolo Sbraccia	President, Italian Society of Obesity (SIO)
Dr Claire Skentelbery	Secretary General, European Biotechnology Network (EBN)
Anja Strootker	Medtronic Diabetes
Prof Hans Törnblom	Member of the Public Affairs Committee (PAC), United European Gastroenterologists (UEG)
Mischa van Eimeren	EU Liaison Officer, European Association for the Study of Diabetes (EASD)
Mieke van Spanje	Co-chair, EASO Patient Council Steering Committee
Euan Woodward	Executive Director, European Association for the Study of Obesity (EASO)
Carlos Zorrinho	MEP, S&D, Portugal

Observers

Name	Title and Organisation
Sheree Bryant	EASO
Tim Edgar	Cambre Associates
Helen Oberg	Cambre Associates
Theresa-Sophie Stiegler	Cambre Associates
Valerio Serse	PhD Researcher, Université Catholique de Louvain la Neuve

Apologies

Apologies were received from the following who had originally confirmed their intent to attend:

Name	Title and Organisation
Adam Burt	Global Marketing Director, Novo Nordisk
Michele Cecchini	Economist/Policy Analyst in the Health Division, OECD
Artur Furtado	Deputy Head of Unit, Health Determinants, DG SANTE, European Commission
John Halloran	Director General, European Social Network
Nina Renshaw	Secretary General, European Public Health Association (EPHA)
Dr Wendy Yared	Director, Association of European Cancer Leagues (ECL)