

A Call to Action under the Slovakian Presidency of the European Council to European Union Institutions, Member States and Countries Worldwide

The participation of people with chronic and long standing conditions in the job market is “problematic” in the EU¹. One in four people of working age are estimated to live with long standing health problems that restrict their daily activities. The majority of these health problems come directly from chronic diseases, especially musculoskeletal conditions (MSKs).

Musculoskeletal conditions in Europe:

- Afflict 100 million individuals.
- Are the leading causes of sickness absence, accounting for half of all absences and 60% of permanent work incapacity.
- Are undiagnosed in over 40% of cases.
- Affect annual European GDP by up to 2%, representing around €240bn in costs.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) Action Plan for the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases, adopted at the 66th session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe in September 2016, recognises the importance of musculoskeletal health, the impact of musculoskeletal conditions and recommends building musculoskeletal health systems that allow timely access to person-centred care, focusing on early intervention to restore and maintain function.

Early intervention is about intervening early and as soon as possible to tackle problems emerging from musculoskeletal and other chronic conditions. The evidence shows that MSKs respond well to early interventions, offering “a window of opportunity” in the initial stages of different inflammatory diseases and in work disability. Integrated care programmes including early identification, timely referral of cases and targeted intervention in workers with recent episodes of disability result in a greater rate of functional recovery. The timing of initial intervention is critical, and the longer the initial intervention is delayed, the more likely it is that the episode of disability becomes permanent.

Fit for Work Global Alliance and its partners call upon:

➤ Governments

- To make early intervention (prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care) and return to work a priority of chronic disease management.
- To develop mechanisms between Ministries such as Health, Employment and Social Affairs, Economy and Finance to enable cross-ministry joint projects and collaboration, and to pool resources for Early Intervention programmes that will result in improved outcomes and cost savings for all.

¹ Eurofound (2014). Employment opportunities for people with chronic diseases.

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- To incentivise and encourage public and private insurers to play their part also in delivering sustainable healthcare systems.
- To develop policies and incentive mechanisms to mobilise employers and occupational health professionals to incorporate Early Intervention approaches in the workplace to better detect and manage MSKs and other chronic conditions.

➤ **DG EMPLOYMENT at the European Commission**

- To support the implementation of good practices on early intervention to help people with MSKs and chronic conditions to remain at work, for example through adequate managerial processes for the disclosure of conditions, provision of appropriate facilities and for return to work.
- To provide guidance on policies and incentive mechanisms that can be put in place to support employers and occupational health professionals, as the Directorate looks to ensure that MSKs are prioritised in the revision of EU health and safety legislation.

➤ **Trio Presidency of Estonia, Bulgaria and Austria (*due to start in July 2017*)**

- To work collaboratively across their government ministries to explore how such cross-ministry joint projects and collaboration mechanisms could be put in place – using the case for early intervention in MSKs as a pilot for other relevant chronic diseases.

In conclusion, the Fit for Work Europe Coalition calls on the Slovakian EU Presidency and relevant stakeholders to prioritise strategies that provide for an appropriate and integrated policy framework based on the concept of Early Intervention. Such a framework can be instrumental in maintaining the well-being and workability of those with chronic conditions, including, MSKs, and thereby contributing to sustained EU public health systems and economic growth.

About Fit for Work Global Alliance (FfW GA)

FfW GA is a multi-stakeholder coalition that champions change in health and work policy and practice for the benefit of those with chronic health conditions. Active for over a decade, the coalition has driven change for better lives across the UK, Europe and beyond and now has a global reach. Our evidence and pioneering toolkits are now being adopted in many countries. They are changing lives for the better, saving costs for employers and governments and contributing to increased sustainability in healthcare systems across the world.

Fit for Work Global Alliance is led by The Work Foundation. For more information please visit:

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