Rare Neurology Multi-Stakeholder Charter

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Introduction

The term 'rare diseases' collectively, is something of a misnomer.

There are almost 11,000 unique rare diseases[1], and although each rare disease will affect only a very small number of people, collectively they affect a large population and have a significant impact on people's lives. In fact, 300 million people globally – including up to 36 million people in Europe - are living with a rare disease[2]. Neurology is a medical speciality covering the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of acute and chronic diseases of the central and peripheral nervous system and skeletal muscle and includes neuro-immunology. In Europe, neurological disorders are the third cause of disability and premature death, according to the Global Burden of Disease study[3,4].

Despite the societal impact, rare neurological diseases rarely receive the attention they deserve from health systems and the policy and decision-makers who shape them. The individual impact is exacerbated by the stereotyping, stigma, discrimination, and isolation that face those living with rare neurological disorders owing to their symptomatic profile; and the failure to deliver policy to support rare neurological disorders. This means people with rare neurological disorders are often left without the care and treatment that they so urgently need.

From a lack of available specialists to be able to give a timely and accurate diagnosis, to fragmented care pathways, there are too many gaps in healthcare systems for people living with a rare neurological disease to fall through. There is no holistic approach to modelling and mapping all individual presentations of rare neurological disorders with the varying pathogenesis.

A first step in providing support to the shortage of specialists came in 2017 with the establishment of European Reference Networks (ERN) for rare diseases. To review a patient's diagnosis and treatment the members of an ERN consult, exchange information and share knowledge with other members in their network. Coordinators and other network leaders convene 'virtual' advisory panels of medical specialists across different disciplines, using a dedicated IT platform and telemedicine tools. ERNs are not directly accessible to individual patients. However, with a patient's consent and in accordance with the rules of their national health system, a patient's information can be referred to the relevant ERN member in their country by their healthcare provider. Owing the numerous rare neurological disorders, and their complex nature, with many yet to be defined, rare neurological disorders are discussed across many of the initial 24 ERNs including ERN-EpiCare (rare epilepsy disorders), ERN-RND (rare neurological disorders), ERN EURO-NMD (rare neuro-muscular disorders) and ERN-RITA (rare immunodeficiency, autoinflammatory and autoimmune diseases). *Networks (europa.eu)

Unfortunately, policy progress to date has been inadequate to support these efforts.

Despite developments in research and development in recent years, 95 percent of known rare diseases lack effective treatments. Even though products in development for rare neurological disorders represent a large share of the rare disease pipeline, this share declines in later phases, indicating difficulties in achieving success for these therapies.

But there is hope and strength in numbers. EU-wide cooperation and collaboration provide an opportunity to improve diagnosis and to encourage the development of new treatments for people living with rare diseases.

Aims of the multi-stakeholder charter:

The multi-stakeholder charter has been developed by the patient advocacy community and healthcare professionals to drive open conversations about the unmet needs of people living with rare neurological diseases. The charter outlines high-impact policy solutions with the potential to transform the lives of patients. Building multi-stakeholder support for the identified policy solutions creates a strong platform to address and engage European and national policymakers on an action plan to transform the lives of patients. The hope for the charter is to serve as the foundation for a united call to action at the EU level to support the development of rare neurology action plans which will aid the expanding effective policy change across the rare neurological disease area.

Overview of current challenges for people living with rare neurological diseases in brief:

People living with rare neurological disorders currently have wide-ranging and complex unmet needs.

These unmet needs, however, provide an opportunity for expansion and collaboration across the EU to tackle problems that are not currently being addressed. These include:

1. Small patient populations for research cohorts mean
    - Insufficient diversity across age, race, ethnicity, and other demographic factors in clinical trials
    - Inadequate epidemiological data for advocacy
    - No unified voice to amplify issues or drive policy change
    - Sparse real-world data
    - Many rare neurological diseases are present in children – this creates added complexity for clinical trials, diagnosis, and care
2. Lack of awareness of rare neurological diseases among specialist and non-specialist healthcare professionals
    - A lack of awareness of symptomatic profiles and disease progression often leads to misdiagnosis and delays in diagnosis

- A low awareness of the burden and impact on the lives of people living with a rare neurological disease leads to delayed diagnosis and sub-optimal care
- Little understanding of the stigma, isolation and discrimination people living with a rare neurological disorder face, and the psychological toll on their well-being
- Often, little, or no mainstream media coverage of some rare neurological diseases
- Generally low public awareness levels of rare neurological diseases

3. Government and health systems are prioritising other diseases

- Delays in time to diagnosis for some rare neurological disorders which result in delays in access to treatments, services and supports
- Limited access to treatments

What are policymakers doing to improve care and treatment for people living with rare disease?

Legislation for rare disease management is under review at an EU level, with programmes of work underway - such as the revision of the Orphan Medicinal Product Regulation, which will amend the legislation first introduced by the EU in 2000 aimed at incentivising investments in the development of medicines for rare conditions and the European Partnership on rare diseases - which aim to improve the quality of life for people living with rare diseases.

In 2022, the Ministerial Conference on Innovation and Care Pathways: For a European Policy on Rare Diseases took place in Paris at the French Ministry of Solidarity and Health as an official event of the French EU Presidency. The conference marked a major milestone in the proposal for a European health union for rare diseases.

Globally, in December 2021, the UN General Assembly adopted the Resolution: 'Addressing the challenges of persons living with a rare disease and their families'. By endorsing it, all 27 EU Member States made a political commitment to protect the rights of people living with a rare condition and to build an infrastructure of health and other public services that address the full breadth of their currently unmet needs.

More recently, the EU held a consultation for the European disability card. This will aim to support free movement for persons with disabilities, facilitating their access to some services across the EU.

Throughout 2023 there has been a major overhaul of the EU pharmaceutical rules via revision of the pharmaceutical strategy for Europe. Orphan products that meet a "high unmet medical need" would continue to benefit from 10 years of market protection. Other orphan products will receive nine years of market protection as standard. Rare disease medicines from either group can gain an extra year of market protection in cases where they are also approved for treatment for another rare disease, or where the drug is launched in all EU countries.

The EU's overarching strategic objective for rare diseases is to improve access to diagnosis, information, and care. It looks to assist EU member states to do this by pooling resources across the continent, enabling patients and healthcare professionals to share their expertise and information to promote EU-level cooperation, coordination, and regulation.

Currently there are, at an EU-wide level, several initiatives which hold promise for the future of rare diseases and their treatment.

CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1 – Rare 2030

Rare 2030 was a two-year foresight study focused on developing policy recommendations for the next decade.

The project, involving over 250 experts, resulted in eight key recommendations. These include establishing a European policy framework for rare diseases, enhancing diagnosis methods, creating a specialised healthcare ecosystem, ensuring social integration and rights, promoting participation and leadership of affected individuals, prioritising rare disease research, maximising data use for health improvement and improving treatment accessibility.

Read more on the project recommendations here.

Case Study 2 – Intersectoral Global Action Plan on Epilepsy and Other Neurological Disorders

Adopted in 2022, the Intersectoral global action plan on epilepsy and other neurological disorders 2022-2031 focuses on improving treatment, care and quality of life for those affected by neurological disorders. It also emphasises brain health across the lifespan.

The plan, which could serve as a framework for rare diseases work, sets global targets and involves various stakeholders. The strategic objectives address policy and governance, effective diagnosis, treatment, care, promotion, prevention, research, innovation, information systems and a public health response to epilepsy.

Find out more here.

Case Study 3 – Horizon Europe

Horizon Europe is the European Union's key funding programme for research and innovation and has a budget of €95.5 billion.

The programme of work seeks to enhance collaboration and strengthen the impact of research and innovation – implementing EU policies while tackling global challenges.

One element of the programme includes a European Partnership on Rare Diseases (see Case Study 2 – European Partnership on Rare Diseases below)

Read more on Horizon Europe here.

Case Study 4 – European Partnership on Rare Diseases

The goal of this partnership is to improve the lives of people living with rare diseases, by developing diagnostics and treatments through multidisciplinary research and innovation programmes, working with relevant stakeholders.

The draft proposal seeks to build a multi-stakeholder eco-system, supporting patient need-led research, developing new therapies and diagnostic pathways, using health and research data, and promoting digital transformation.

Read the draft outline of the partnership proposal here.

Case Study 5 - Revision of the Orphan Medicinal Product Regulation

The Revision presents an unprecedented opportunity to revisit the current model, recognising its strengths and weaknesses, and to drive success by design.

It will provide a pivotal opportunity to hone and enhance the system for spurring greater medical innovation and boosting the development of new medicines.

Advocates with real-life experience of the current OMP Regulation reported feeling cautiously optimistic about the prospects for positive change.

Read more on the Revision progress here.

Case Study 6 – EU4Health Programme and non-communicable diseases (NCD) initiative "Healthier Together"

EU4Health has over €5 billion for seven years (2021-2027) and aims to improve and foster health in the Union, protect people from serious cross-border threats to health, improve medicinal products, medical devices and crisis-relevant products.

Connected to the EU4Health, the EC launched the Healthier Together – EU NCD Initiative to support EU countries in identifying and implementing effective policies and actions to reduce the burden of major NCDs and improve citizens' health and well-being. The initiative covers the 2022-2027 period and has 5 strands, including mental and neurological disorders.

See more details on the EU4Health here and the NCD Initiative here.

Case Study 7 – European Health Data Space

In 2022, the EC announced a regulation to set up the European Health Data Space This proposal supports individuals to take control of their health data, supports the use of health data for better healthcare delivery, better research, innovation, and policy making, and enables the EU to make full use of the potential offered by a safe and secure exchange, use and reuse of health data.

Sharing health data to advance scientific research and improve clinical practice is of particular importance to the rare disease community, where knowledge and expertise are limited, patient populations are geographically dispersed and their health data is scattered.

Read more on the EHDS here.

Policy priorities required to improve the care and treatment of people with rare neurological diseases:

Patient advocacy groups and industry are active in advocating for an increased focus on rare neurological diseases. However, there are still significant gaps in healthcare systems, particularly across rare neurological disease, which need to be addressed.

We are calling for policymakers and health ministers across Europe to enter this dialogue and drive improvements at a system level.

These are the areas where particular focus and development are needed, to address low system awareness and prioritisation of rare neurological diseases and their burden, and improve treatment for people living with a rare neurological disease:

Clinical and medical education

- ### Education and training for healthcare professionals

  Recognising there is a shortage of specialists and specialist centres, and issues with access to specialists across many healthcare systems

- ### Mental health support for people living with rare neurological disorders

  With respect and care paid to distinguishing between mental health disorders, rare neurological disorders and the health and well-being needs of those living with a rare neurological disease

- ### Specific biomarker testing

  Diagnostic facilities need to ensure a more comprehensive approach to the diagnosis of rare diseases, with many people living with a rare disease going undiagnosed for years, or with an inaccurate diagnosis. This diagnostic odyssey can be immensely distressing for people living with an undiagnosed condition, their caregivers and wider family

Best practice guideline implementation

- ### Best practice and screening/diagnosis guidelines and practice

  Sometimes people struggle to receive a timely and accurate diagnosis of their condition. Ensuring HCPs have access to the best tools and information is a significant first step in driving system improvement

- ### Making rare neurological diseases a priority at EU and national level

  Currently, health systems and policymakers' priorities and attentions are focused elsewhere. Through wider EU-level coordination, with support from Member States and patient communities across the EU, we can work together to ensure the maximum possible benefit for people living with a rare neurological disease

Access to healthcare

- ### Socioeconomic factors

  We know that socioeconomic inequalities have a significant impact on access to services and care – with worsening outcomes. Governments and the healthcare systems need to proactively address these with policy-driven initiatives to ensure better outcomes for all

- Cross-border healthcare access (and sustainable access pathways)

  Particularly in rare diseases, with smaller patient populations, expanding cohorts of patient data for research and development purposes beyond national boundaries would have potentially huge benefits. This needs to be supported by the development of EU-level Health Data Space regulation, to ensure an appropriate level of data sharing and cooperation

Challenges impacted by the scientific innovation in rare neurology

- Inadequate funding to drive innovation

  Funding for rare neurological diseases falls far behind other disease areas, curtailing innovation, research, and development. Researchers need to be better incentivised by EU-level and national bodies to focus on rare neurological disease

- Lack of a multi-disciplinary approach and network to tackle different pathologies

  Healthcare systems often focus on a specific area to treat and are not designed to treat the whole person. We need clearer defined holistic pathways to better treat and manage people living with rare neurological disease to address their unmet need

Multi-stakeholder charter recommendations:

1. More funding to support rare neurological disease research

Rare neurological diseases suffer from a lack of funding and attention, due to the relatively low populations within each specific disease area, and the potential complexity involved in developing new therapies. Researchers need the right incentives and motivation to pursue work in this area.

2. Promotion of the importance of natural history studies for those living with rare neurological conditions

To better understand, develop, and treat rare diseases, a focus on natural history can aid the development of safe and effective treatments. Natural History studies can provide invaluable information to those impacted by rare neurological conditions to help them to prepare for their future. A natural history study looks at how a disease progresses from its onset to conclusion and can be vital to our understanding of a condition, particularly where information is incomplete, such as in many rare neurological disease areas.

3. A multidisciplinary approach to rare neurological diseases

From diagnosis to treatment – people living with a rare disease deserve a timely and accurate diagnosis of their condition, as well as a clear pathway and access to

treatments and clinical experts, via an integrated care pathway for rare neurological conditions. Policy and decision-makers need to work with healthcare professionals and patients to design systems and services that are fit for purpose for people living with a rare disease.

4. A holistic appreciation of the impact on those living with a rare neurological disease, their caregivers, and their families

To make the lived experiences of people living with rare neurological diseases, their caregivers, and their families, known and recognised and ensure adequate prioritisation within healthcare systems and greater support and understanding amongst the public and policymakers.

5. The patient perspective and lived experience should be incorporated into decision-making, system design, treatment, and care delivery

This is particularly important in rare disease, where there is less official data and evidence, making real-world individual experiences a powerful tool.

6. An empowered patient community – one voice for rare neurological disease

One that is inclusive and diverse, led by people living with rare diseases who can advocate for their community, working with Patient Advocacy Groups and other key organisations and individuals, to ensure appropriate attention and priority is given to rare neurological diseases.

7. Greater public awareness for rare neurology, and neurology more generally

To discuss common interests and raise awareness of these conditions, connecting people living with different rare neurological diseases would be a powerful tool for providing support across these communities. Furthermore, each individual national parliament should provide fuller and more targeted attention to rare neurological diseases within their purview – with specific groups assembled to lead work in this area (for example, The National Assembly's (France) Flash mission on rare neurodegenerative diseases)

8. Health systems need to adopt new approaches to support HCPs in better managing rare neurological disease activity

This would aid in better diagnosis and early treatment for people living with a rare disease. Rare diseases are complex and can be difficult for health systems to manage; there is great potential for utilising AI and machine learning for rare diseases, to aid clinicians in identifying and best managing rare diseases.

9. Recognise the value of precision medicine and precision care

Most rare diseases have a genetic origin, with 70% appearing during childhood. The greater use and uptake of precision medicine has huge potential to drive innovation and transformation in the development of treatments for people with rare neurological diseases.

10. Orphan drug legislation to be optimised for rare neurological diseases

By making rare neurological diseases a greater priority, with an EU-wide framework for research, innovation, and development, the research community can be incentivised to focus on this area and drive innovation in new treatments. It is key that Member States work together to contribute to the European Joint Programme on Rare Diseases to ensure rare disease policy and action align across the EU, with a joint action plan.

11. Improving disability assessments

We need to ensure that all people with disabilities, including those living with a rare neurological disease, can exercise their right to free movement and residence across the EU. To this end, the EU Disability Card should include improvements to disability assessments and determination at the national level, and greater harmonisation of disability assessment principles and tools in all the EU Member States.

12. Leverage the European Health Data Space

Data management and sharing are of particular importance for learning more about rare diseases and their appropriate medical treatments. EHDS should harmonise and optimise electronic health records to facilitate cross-border healthcare; ensure the ethical use of secondary health data; engage rare disease patients, including people living with rare neurological diseases, to better understand what people with lived experience expect from research and data sharing, and; increase digital health literacy with educational programmes.

13. Realise the potential of the revision of the EU pharmaceutical strategy

The EU pharmaceutical rules have not been updated for 20 years and we now have a once in a generation chance to generate systemic change leading to reshaping the overall approach to rare diseases in the EU, leading to tangible benefits for the rare disease community. The strategy should be set in a broader framework that also includes diagnostics, healthcare and R&I. It should promote the improvement of screening tools, strengthen the incentive system for orphan drugs, and lead to better coordination of individual European and national policies.

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