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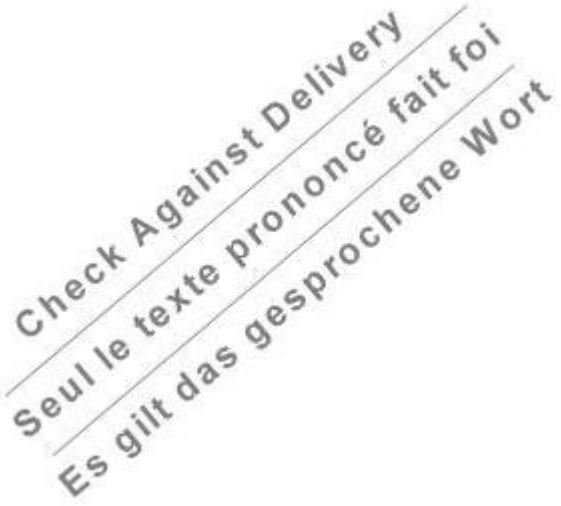
Launch of the Research Strategy of the European Joint Programming Initiative in Neurodegenerative Disease Research



Launch of the Research Strategy

Brussels, 7 February 2012

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here today because we really have something to celebrate - the launch of Europe's Research Strategy for the Joint Programming for Neurodegenerative Diseases – or JPND for short.

Neurodegenerative diseases already pose a major challenge to our society, and if we do nothing the outlook is bleak. While the over-65s currently represent 16% of the population, this will increase to around 25% in 2030, and while of course its good news that we are living longer, growing old also presents challenges, few more worrying than the increasing prevalence of neurodegenerative diseases. Quite clearly, we need to act, and we need to act together.

The answers to these challenges will be found in science and research. This Research Strategy comes not a moment too soon. It provides a much-needed framework for European-level coordination and investment in neurodegenerative disease research.

But what does this mean in practice? It means that we are coordinating our best researchers across Europe, who are working hard to find the answers to one of our biggest public-health issues. It means better value for the public money invested in this research. And, most importantly, it means that by working together, across borders, we will make faster progress in getting the results that millions of people depend on.

It took a coordinated effort to define and agree how to harness European research efforts most effectively to improve the prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and patient care for these debilitating conditions.

So I would like to congratulate the members of the JPND for having come this far already. This is a defining moment, when the first Joint Programming Initiative moves from design to implementation. It is no exaggeration to say that you are trailblazers!

One of the key reasons behind the decision to launch the Joint Programming process on the 14th of July 2008, was the recognition that the major challenges facing our society – whether they are health, environmental, or energy related, for example – are so great, and so complex that if we are to find answers, we need to act together and coordinate publicly-funded research across Europe.

We need economies of scale across Europe, we need the best research brains working in a coordinated way, and we need to avoid unnecessary duplication. So, Joint Programming Initiatives, led by the Member States, were designed to solve this problem, and capitalise on the opportunities presented by working better together.

Member States responded quickly. In fact, just one day after the launch of the Joint Programming process, European Member States launched the idea of a pilot Joint Programming Initiative on Alzheimer's research in an informal meeting of national Research Ministers.

This idea quickly grew in a wider Joint Programming Initiative on Neurodegenerative Disease Research (JPND).

Member States also responded en-masse by launching, over the last two years, nine more Joint Programming Initiatives in different fields – these will address a wide range of challenges. This is a new process where Member States collaborate with the Commission to identify and define such initiatives, in the interest of the whole European research and innovation landscape. And the process is working well.

So far, coordination of the activities of the JPND – through the JUMPAHEAD project – has been very successful. But we now have a bigger task ahead of us, and that is to implement the JPND's Research Strategy.

We are expecting the countries participating in the JPND to commit substantial scientific, financial and management resources, even in the current economic climate. The economic argument for investing in science and research in order to promote growth and jobs, even under severe budgetary constraints, has already been won.

And when it comes to finding new solutions to our health challenges, the case is even more compelling. If we invest wisely and strategically in neurodegenerative diseases now, we can ensure better, more cost-effective health care for the future.

I am very confident that the JPND will successfully meet this challenge. We already have strong indications of success - a pilot call on the optimisation of biomarkers for neurodegenerative diseases and the harmonisation of their use between clinical centres, was launched in May 2011, in advance of this Research Strategy. Following a peer-review evaluation, four projects have been selected for funding, addressing diseases such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, Creutzfeldt-Jakob, and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. I wish these projects every success.

The JPND is being watched closely, and will set standards for the other Joint Programming Initiatives. This places an extra responsibility on the JPND member countries, and I am confident all of you will agree on an efficient way to implement the Research Strategy, thus continuing on this successful path.

These important efforts by Member States mirror an unprecedented investment by the EU in the area of neurodegenerative diseases. Since 2007, the Seventh Framework Programme for Research has invested around 300 million euro in support of research on neurodegenerative diseases, including 100 million euro for research on Alzheimer’s disease alone. This is a necessary and carefully-managed investment in the future health and happiness of millions of Europeans.

Part of this work is being done through the Innovative Medicines Initiative Joint Undertaking - a public-private partnership between the European Commission and the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations. The Joint Undertaking supports, for example, the PHARMA-COG project which aims to develop and validate new tools to test candidate drugs for the treatment of Alzheimer's disease and its symptoms in a faster and more sensitive way.

This kind of collaboration with the pharmaceutical industry is important, because it comes at a time when the industry is scaling back its research on the central nervous system.

I would therefore also encourage the JPND to actively seek further collaboration with the pharmaceutical industry, and to see how it can best leverage corporate investments in this area and contribute to European competitiveness.

As I said a few moments ago, the emergence of neurodegenerative diseases is one consequence of the ageing population in Europe. Demographic change is one of the major societal challenges addressed by the EU2020 strategy.

In order to address this challenge, the Commission’s proposal for Horizon 2020, the new EU research and innovation funding programme, identifies “health, demographic change and well-being” as one of the grand challenges to be specifically addressed. I am confident that the Member States and the European Parliament will agree on this move to a more challenge-focused way of financing research and innovation.

Speaking of which, I would also like to mention that we are piloting a new approach to bringing all the relevant research stakeholders – public and private - together to tackle a major societal challenge – in this case Active and Healthy Ageing. Of course, tackling neurodegenerative diseases is a major factor in achieving the Partnership's goal of adding an average of two healthy years to the lives of Europeans by 2020. I would encourage strong links between the EIP and the JPND.

While it is too early to judge how Horizon 2020 could best interact with the JPND, it is clear that public-public partnerships will play a vital role in addressing the societal challenges that are the focus of the three pillars of the Horizon 2020 structure.

In Horizon 2020, two main instruments are envisaged to implement public-public partnerships, and might be used to support the Joint Programming Initiatives: a simplified single ERA-NET instrument, supporting both the networking of programme owners and managers as well as their joint activities, such as joint calls and programmes. And Article 185 initiatives integrating the science, management and financing of national and Commission actions in a given area.

Finally, I am glad to see that the JPND includes an important dissemination and communication programme. We all need to raise greater public awareness of brain-related issues, in particular as regards neurodegenerative disorders. This is a field of medicine that generates headlines every day and nearly everybody has a friend or family member that is affected by these diseases. The public is hungry for information and signs of progress!

So, I am delighted to announce that the Commission has designated May 2013 the Month of the Brain. I count on the JPND to help us make this major awareness-raising campaign a great success. We will take this opportunity to inform, discuss, stimulate, listen and learn. And we will have a wonderful chance to showcase the excellent work being done at European level and in the Member States to improve lives everywhere.

In the meantime, I wish the JPND every success in implementing its Research Strategy. I will keep a close eye on your progress!

Congratulations, and thank you.