

EU countries cannot tackle brain disorders alone

Written by Jerzy Buzek on 11 March 2016 in Opinion
Opinion

Millions of EU citizens are affected by brain disorders and member states will only be able to take on the challenge if they work together, writes Jerzy Buzek.



The human brain is considered the most complex single organism in the universe. Not only can this 'super computer' generate theories on the origins of matter and life and develop devices to access the outer edges of our universe, it also steers our feeling, emotions and personalities.

This is what we are reminded of as we celebrate the annual Brain Awareness Week from 14 to 20 March 2016.

This global campaign contributes to increasing public awareness on the progress and benefits of brain research. I am personally convinced that brain research has never been more important.

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One in three Europeans - 165 million people - is likely to be affected by a brain disorder, spanning more than 200 conditions from neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases, to mental health disorders such as depression and schizophrenia.

Treating these conditions costs the EU €798bn each year, an amount that will increase significantly in future.

And yet many of the most common and severe brain disorders are either preventable or can be remedied with inexpensive therapies. For example, the World Bank ranks treatment for epilepsy and secondary stroke prevention as examples of 'best buys' in global health.

Reducing disease and disability linked to brain disorders is undoubtedly one of the greatest scientific challenges for the decades to come.

Improving our knowledge of the brain will have long-term benefits. It could play a greater role in driving innovation in Europe; only with healthy brains will we be able to tackle the most pressing challenges the EU currently faces.

As Parliament's rapporteur on FP7, I encouraged the Commission to focus on the brain. Much to my satisfaction, they have listened to my recommendations.

More research in this field is crucial, but we cannot overlook other relevant issues. We need to improve awareness, remove the stigma or myths associated with brain disorders.

We must highlight the need for the right infrastructure and policies, develop the right regulatory environment, encourage innovation, facilitate the absorption and integrate research results into policy and good practice, as well as greater consideration for patients' needs.

This requires greater collaboration among the scientific community, research funding agencies, governments, academic institutions, multilateral organisations, advocacy organisations and health providers.

No EU country alone has the expertise or the resources to tackle these issues alone. Real progress can only be made by working together. Therefore, I welcome more integrated, innovative, and coordinated national efforts.

This should be strengthened by EU-led initiatives to assist countries in devising, adopting and implementing National Brain Plans.

These multi-sectoral efforts should be directed at promoting good practices in targeted prevention, health promotion, timely diagnosis, post-diagnostic support and therapy, research, training and further education of health professionals. They should also improve the quality of epidemiological data on brain disorders.

Similar successful initiatives show that even if health remains a national responsibility, joint European action can create considerable added value by confronting the major challenges in brain health in a

more efficient way. This will help avoid ineffective action or duplication of roles as well as encouraging better use of available resources.

About the author

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- [3] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/opinion/eu-needs-brain-health-strategy>
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